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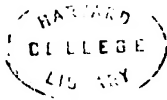
AUTHOR OF "BELLA," "THE POST GIRL,"
"THE DOCTOR'S LASS," ETC.



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FONDIE

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PART I

I

IF only I had Dod Marritt's slate and Dod Marritt with his colored chalks to help me, what a book the two of us might begin! Dod can draw things better than most folk can see them, and an infinitely finer color. The pictures he has rubbed out with his flat hand and coat sleeve alone would constitute a chronicle of all Whivvle, and more than fill the obese family Bible with the big brass clasp beneath the parlor pelargonium, that smells of Moses and damp cupboards when opened, and has Dod's name in full, spelled properly, and the date of Dod's birth, on the flyleaf in Dod's mother's Sunday writing, all written over ruled lines on a down gradient and shaking like Isaac Parfitt's hand or Deacon Smeddy's voice when he says Amen with both eyes shut.

On wet nights when it increases one's own comfort to think of other folk abroad, and Dod's father says complacently: "I wouldn't care to be driving wum frev Hoomuth [home from Hunmouth] ti-neet, Missus," and his wife retorts: "Thoo hadn't need"; or nights of boisterous wind, when Boreas seems to tussle for possession of the roof with both hands, after the fashion that Dod and his sister scuffle for the slate, and at times seems to have got the mastery and gone off with it; and the whistle through the keyhole in the kitchen door is as piercing as Dod can make with four fingers in his mouth, and will blow a candle out at six paces; and the oilcloth flaps distractedly like a wounded bird; and the snecks rattle, and the lamp is seized with paroxysms, and goes blue in the face,

thrusting out a tremendous smoky flame like a contorted tongue halfway up the chimney; or on nights of biting frost when the door-latch tingles in the fingers, and the very stars seem to shiver with cold; or nights of snow when the snow-flakes float down the flue and spit on the wet coals; these are the nights when Dod pours out his chalks from the pencil-box upon the kitchen table, and rubs his coat cuff over the slate's surface, and crosses his right leg over his left, and puffs out his right eye, with the brow cocked up over it, and cries his customary formula to the company:

"Noo! What mun I draw?"

But what does Dod not draw when once he warms to the work, and his imagination runs away with him, kindled at one moment by the kitchen's praise, and at another by its denial of his ability?

Stack-fires, school-feasts, anniversaries, weddings, and funerals he can re-create with rare fidelity and splendor. There is no subject from Hunmouth Fair to Jarge Amery's nose he cannot present with truth and adorn with imagination.

None.

. . . Except perhaps . . . yes . . . there is one subject in which his crayons fail. He cannot draw Blanche.

When the artist, after long incubation and much enlargement of his right eye, pushes the long-secreted slate beneath the noses of the expectant, himself filled with creative confidence and zeal, saying:

"Noo then! Look ye. Here we are. There's choch door, look ye, and there's Fondie wi' his Sunday coat shutting up 'armonium, and there's Blanche, see ye . . ."

. . . The atmosphere grows strangely unresponsive on a sudden.

"Wheer's Blanche?" asks Dod's brother, taking his pipe from his mouth, and speaking in a voice that seems acquainted with no compromise.

"There," says the artist, pointing one of his many fingers

in her direction—though not the most confident of them, and one that hesitates to indicate her position in the picture too closely. "Thoo's looking at her all time."

"That's none Blanche," says Dod's brother firmly.

"Isn't it?" Dod contends, though with shaken assurance. "Who is it then?"

"I don't know, and I don't care!" Dod's brother replies. "But it isn't Blanche, so thoo can rub her oot onny time thoo likes."

"Gie us slate," says the artist resentfully.

"Tek her," says Dod's brother.

"I will an' all."

"Neabody's stopping thee."

"Let's have 'od [hold]."

"Noo then!" interposes Dod's mother. "No quarrellin' i' kitchen. If thoo can't draw wi'oot lossin' temper I'll tek slate away frev thee an' lock her up. So thoo knaws."

II

WHEN Dod's mother gives him a slice of cake—not the common sort he eats with apathy on Sundays, as of right, but the richly fruited kind for festivals and high occasions: the sort that, when he petitions for a second helping, makes his mother ask, in cutting it, "Diz thoo want ti be sick?"—it costs him infinite trouble to determine precisely at what portion of its circumference he shall begin.

To break into a book is a problem not much easier, for beginnings are arbitrary things, and to have to choose one out of so many is sufficient to make a man's judgment falter.

One might, of course, choose one's beginning as the Anniversary preacher chooses his text, who, having given it out twice and cleared his throat, and closed his Bible to let everybody see that what follows is to be extempore, adds:

"In order to understand these striking words, my brethren, it will be necessary to go back a few centuries in the world's history and inquire what was the precise state of Israel at that time, and try to understand something of the circumstances under which they were so forcibly uttered."

Or if we were Deacon Smeddy, we would begin with a bold invocation of the Scriptures, asking:

"What diz Psalmist say?" or "What diz Book tell us i' twenty-second verse o' the fourteenth chapter o' the Second Book o' Kings?"—questions that impose silence on the doughtiest and make not a few of us wish the Bible had never been written, as Dod does. Even old Mrs. Winthrop has been heard to say:

"Book was meant ti be a bit o' comfort ti folk"—as if the Deacon had misconceived its purpose; and nobody would ever question Mrs. Winthrop's piety, for she had lost two husbands and five children, and had received so many other signal tokens of the Almighty's attention that she had come to be regarded as peculiarly belonging to Him.

Or, again, we might begin with Fondie, perched on his ladder, painting rain-spouts as if he loved them; or practicing on his aunt's harmonium some hot summer evening in his shirt-sleeves.

III

FONDIE was not, in the first place, his baptismal name. Fondie's real name was Enos—after him in whose day men, we are told, first began to call upon the name of the Lord and incidentally to make themselves a nuisance. The choice was Fondie's father's, and being thus doubly sanctified by parental will and Holy Scripture, Fondie was far too pious and too dutiful to quarrel with it, albeit he ventured to confess that he sometimes wished it might have been put into his father's head to christen him Jubal, after

the great progenitor of all them that handle the harp and the organ—though his modesty admitted he would have been no great adornment to the name.

"Even name o' Enos," said he, "is ower good for me, I misdoot."

And so Whivvle seemed to think, for it never called him by it, and the name was as submerged as the old kettle in Dod's father's duck-pond, that comes to light only now and again in time of drought, offering then but a target for missiles and irony.

Because of his filial obedience and because of his Mosaic humility, and because Fondie never showed the least vestiges of wrath and passion that disfigure his fellows, and never used bad language—even when unprovoked—and was not a bit of good among the girls, Whivvle called him "Fondie," which being interpreted means "Foolish One," and Fondie accepted the name with that unquestioning humility which marked his acceptance of all the rest of life's gifts, good and evil. There was not a child in Whivvle, of an age to walk on all fours and lisp the name, but might call him Fondie without fear, and did. Male infants strutting in their first breeches, with big foreheads and jam and bread-crumb mustaches extending as far back as the ears, would apostrophize him as Fondie and never wince, saying, "Fondie! . . . thy feythur wants thee. Thoo's ti look sharp," and Fondie—far from displaying wrath or threatening them with condign punishment, as other men who could be cited might have done—would merely express gratitude for the information and say politely, "Thank ye, Willim," or "I'se obliged ti ye, James Henry," as the case might be, and obey the message with as much alacrity as if a full-grown man or his own father had delivered it.

On the big board that stood boldly on its tall stilts above the yard end in the main street—that none but the foolhardy ever sought to climb, or those among the inexperienced whose ears had never tasted those sharp and sudden fires lurking in

the wheelwright's wrathful hand—Fondie figured as "and Son" in multicolored letters with gold-leaf shading (his own handiwork, and the patient toil of weeks), and Father and Son together were proclaimed to the world at large as Smiths, Wheelwrights, Carpenters, Agricultural Implement Makers, and Undertakers. Fondie's father was as dark a man in later life as ever walked out of the pages of the Bible. He was as laughterless as Jehovah, and as summary. Nothing ever seemed to propitiate him—not even the strong drink of which he was an imbibor in due seasons. His beard was his passport to piety. What the wheelwright must have looked without it is inconceivable. St. Peter minus his keys would have been no more distinguishable from the rest of the company of hirsute apostles than Fondie's father deprived of his beard that flowed down far below the lowest button of his Sunday waistcoat and blew between his legs in a head wind like an apron, or over his shoulder, splitting to either side of his neck and wrapping his cheeks as if it were a comforter; and getting into the cog-wheels when he stooped to examine machinery, and into the dust when he knelt by a reaper, and catching all the shavings of the workshop, and even on occasions such substantial articles as nails and gimlets that the wheelwright sought all round the yard and only discovered at the White Cow.

But there is no burden so cumbersome that man will not suffer for pride's sake, and one can bear with a barrow-load of disadvantages for the glory of a beard that is twice the length of any within six parishes, and has come to be regarded as one of the landmarks of the district, like the church or the Butter Cross; a beard that has not known the shears or done homage to the knife these thirty years, but seems established in its own righteousness like the very Scriptures.

It was one of the chief spiritual assets of the little red-brick chapel where he worshipped among the Primevals on Sunday, just as Deacon Smeddy's side-whiskers and texts were with the Wesleysans. Till the wheelwright sat down in his place

with the sacred beard grasped in his hand, his brows rugged as Mount Carmel, the spirit of the Lord seemed shy of descending. One morose "Amen" emerging out of the wheelwright's beard was of more account in worship than half a dozen hallelujahs from any other throat.

In his early days the wheelwright had been musician to the Brotherhood, and led the hymns with a fiddle hoary beneath the resin of religious fervor, drawing across the frosted strings a bow so intensely arched, that, furnished with an arrow, one might have shot birds with it. In chapel when the hymn was given out and the Brotherhood waited expectantly for the sound of it with averted eyes, the wheelwright had been wont to show like one possessed; sway his body to and fro as though animated by internal pains, perspiring through anticipation already of the energy he meant to expend; wave his bow aloft to the beat of a whole bar, crying "Yan! Twoa! Threeah! Fower!" and thereat, with a roar of frenzy, make onslaught upon the fiddle with such vehemence that the resin rose from its bridge and belly in clouds, circling his head in the sunlight like a golden halo, and making even the wheelwright on occasions thrust his fiddle to a side and sneeze into his beard with a sound like the crash of crockery.

It is said that the fiddle strings grew so hot in the course of a hymn that you could not bear your hand upon them for two minutes after the Amen, and in a long hymn the wheelwright (at his zenith) was forced to give his instrument a rest for one verse in three, at least, to cool her bearings and prevent her from firing. Dod's father said it used to be currently reported that Joe Bassiemoor had fetched sparks out of her once in dry weather when he played "Glory, Glory and Salvation" at a camp meeting, and there is certainly no limit to what zeal can do.

Fondie's musical aspirations derived unmistakably from this parental source. From his father he received the hard rudiments of the fiddle—which made his head and knuckles some-

times very sore, and brought up lumps on his forehead like the cobbles in front of the tailor's shop. In exchange for considerable repairs to a sewing-machine the wheelwright picked up the disjected members of Harker Webster's fiddle that had hung by the neck to a nail in the kitchen wall since the old man's death, dropping to pieces a limb at a time, like the gibbeted remains of some malefactor, and fitted the fiddle up for Fondie in such spare moments as the glue-pot happened to be handy, or he came across a serviceable screw that looked, in the wheelwright's phraseology, "like hoddin'" (holding). A coat of varnish completed the operation, and the fiddle emerged from the process with such a luster as few fly-papers in these degenerate days can boast. She took a whole week to dry—and that not completely—and every night she caught something when the workshop was closed; moth, or gnat, or daddy-long-legs.

But she dried, or very nearly, at last, preserving innumerable imprints of the wheelwright's thumb where he had felt of her all round the purfling each morning to know how she was getting on, and the wheelwright looked at Fondie with a lurid eye, and said:

"Thoo'll 'a ti play 'er."

IV

NOTHING could have lain nearer to Fondie's heart or dearer to his desires.

He was barely fourteen at the time, but he had never been like other boys; he had never rapped at lighted windows by night and run away, or tied bricks and old bottles to door-handles; or put his tongue out and spread fingers from the nose outwardly at adults, and been led back to his father's yard by a single ear. For Fondie had ever loved the Law, and his feet walked in the paths of an implicit and baffling

obedience. Before such obedience even his father stood perplexed, declaring:

"Lad's fond. He'll do owt onnybody tells him."

For a Whivvle-born son that humbly answers, "I will, feythur," when his father bids him to a task that any self-respecting son should seek to shirk, constitutes less of a joy than of bewilderment to the parent that begot him.

"Gie us no Wills!" the wheelwright has been known to say. "Gie us Do's, and sharp, an' think on thoo dizzn't answer me back."

The sight of the varnished fiddle and the smell of it roused Fondie's dearest hopes. To him the vision of his parent holding forth the fiddle by the neck as if it had been a turkey, partook of the nature of an annunciation.

"I misdoot I lack skill ti handle her, feythur," he is reported to have said, "wi'oot I'se ti be favored wi' your kind instruction."

"Aye, thoo is!" the wheelwright snapped through his beard. "An' thoo'll be favored wi' summut else an' all wi'oot thoo shaws a bit o' sense."

Albeit Fondie's musical efforts were mere fuel for his sire's contempt, the first lump on his bowing knuckles was not ten days old when the wheelwright deemed him proficient enough (with an admonition that would have taken the heart out of any less naturally humble) to play on Sunday to the public honor and glory of God. To perform before the Almighty at such short notice was ordeal sufficiently terrible to make the bowels of any catechumen tremble—let alone the thought of a parent with a three-foot beard that one was liable to sit on by accident when the pew was crowded, and with a wrath like the refiner's fire. If the wheelwright might have changed places with the Deity for the nonce, this occasion would have been dispossessed of much of its terror—for all that Fondie's musical imperfections shrank from the impropriety of making themselves known to such an exalted ear. He had not reached

as yet the age when he could say "Amen" and "Hallelujah" aloud in chapel, as a relief to the tedium of sitting still.

Nor had Fondie earned the admitted right to cough twice without receiving an admonitory cuff from behind, or without the risk of having the sharp edge of a hymnbook thrust silently into the small of his back. To take sudden precedence of all these adults, therefore, and be a leader of men along with his father was a prospect whose very brightness blinded him to the glory of it. But neither pride nor humility had long notice in which to exercise itself. The wheelwright's brief intimation, "Noo, fetch thy fiddle an' come wi' me!" fell like a thunderbolt out of a blue sky on the Sabbath morning. Fondie could but open his mouth incredulously, drinking mutely of the air, like a fish.

"Ti house o' warship, feythur?" he inquired, like one in doubt of his own intelligence.

"Wheer else an' all?" the wheelwright demanded caustically. "Ti bed? Wheer diz thoo gan ti every Sabbath morn?"

"I misdoot my feythur's reposin' ower mich confidence i' me," Fondie told his mother in a humble aside, having first assured himself by a discreet glance that his father's shoulders were turned. "I'se jealous I shan't do his instruction a deal o' credit. But sin' it's his will . . ."

He interred the fiddle reverently in the green baize bag that his sister had worked for its reception, and accompanied the wheelwright to chapel. That is to say, he hurriedly overtook the paternal beard at the yard gate, to receive the challenge: "How mich langer diz thoo think I'se boon ti wait o' thee?" and humbly preceded him by a couple of yards or so to the chapel door. To have walked behind his father would have called forth the wheelwright's stern displeasure: "What's thoo skulkin' aback o' me for? Come thy ways i' front, wheer I can see thee." To have walked abreast would have argued an equality bordering on actual disrespect that the wheelwright would have been the first to censure. Fondie's father walked

abreast with none of his own household—not even with his own wife since matrimony had put an end to their courting days. He accepted her as a sign of the infirmity of the flesh; a necessary part of man's temptation, tribulation, and fall, and acknowledged her merely as he would have acknowledged the sinful nature of his own heart. When she accompanied her lord to worship—which, during the later years of her life, she did at most some twice or thrice on hot Sunday evenings in summer, to take her annual exercise and air—she labored patiently in the wheelwright's wake with uplifted petticoats and an umbrella clasped midway by the left hand, as far behind her husband as Fondie walked in front, and the wheelwright never deigned once to turn his head, though conscious of her proximity, saying a terse "Come on wi' thee!" each time she stopped, as if she had been a horse; and responding in curt monosyllables of a repressive tendency to her thoughtless comments on the state of Whivle gardens, or the color-wash on Whivle walls that had been changed (she noted) from yellow to blue, or blue to pink, since last year.

Indeed, it was maintained that the elder Bassiemoor looked with small favor on the presence of womenfolk at worship, having been known to say "they took over-much room by aif," and there was "a deal more warship wi'oot 'em"—chapel, in his estimation, being a place designed for men and the Almighty.

Fondie's début attracted less attention that it would have done had it taken place under more favorable surroundings, but the wheelwright's chapel was a hard nut to crack for all but the most seasoned and practiced devout. It stood away from the road in a corner of Bless Allcot's field, with the hedge on two sides of it, and nettle-grown palings on the other two, to keep Bless Allcot's cattle from licking the paint off the sills, or putting their heads in at the windows during divine service, which they did once when the chapel was newly built (in Bless Allcot's father's time), and Bless Allcot's father's black bull

came up to the open window when Bless Allcot's father had just got as far as "O Lord!" with his eyes shut, and his face tied up in such a knot that only those who knew him well could have told where his mouth was at the moment—and coughed grass and spittle all down the back of his neck, like one of the bulls of Bashan; and some say the old man jumped up crying one thing, and some say another, and some say he did, and others say he didn't (though Dod's father vows he knows for a fact he did—and something else beside).

Even Fondie sorrowfully agreed that the chapel was poorly situated, and that "folk mud easy overlook her, or think she was a cowshed." For in summer Bless Allcot's hedge rose up high above her windows, precluding all vestige of hope from the devout worshippers that they might catch a glimpse of the outer world on these two sides roadward, and see, during prayer, how it went with the wicked without—while there was nothing but cows and buttercups on the field side. And then there was a narrow foot-bridge to traverse, spanning Bless Allcot's dyke; and a stile to negotiate, and the pathway round the meeting-house walls was so narrow that only courting couples could make the circuit in comfort. And even then it took them a long time, and there was nothing, really, to see.

V

SO Fondie's initiation passed without incident. One or two human heads popped up into sight above the fieldward window-sills, and down again—so quickly that they might have been footballs, except that they were Jarge Bailey, Bar Marritt, and some other absentees from the Wesleyan gallery, come to see Fondie receive his baptism of blood and fire, piously hoping it might be hot enough.

The accounts, therefore, disseminated by the brief spectators of Fondie's début through the chapel windows must be regarded

as apocryphal. Indeed, we may conclude that Fondie came through the ordeal with sufficient credit, for the wheelwright declared at the dinner-table, in front of the roast beef and Yorkshire pudding:

"Thoo's not worth a tinker's damn. I could 'a made more noise by aif wi'oot thee. There thoo sat i' pew as stiff as a lump o' cold suet while thoo seed me wark. Was thoo ivver i' a sweat? Nay, that thoo wasn't. Thy shirt's as dry as kaff (chaff) noo, I'll awander (warrant)."

"I'll admit she's not si wet as you've a right ti expect, feythur," Fondie responded humbly, "or as I'd wish her ti be. But I wadn't say she's dry. She's damp i' a place or two."

"What wi'?" the wheelwright demanded. "Not wi' fiddling, I know very well. Thoo didn't fiddle. Thoo nobbut niggled bow aif an inch across strings as though thoo was cuttin' thy meat. An' did thoo ivver stamp thy feet on grund when thoo struck at fiddle? Nay, that thoo didn't. Not yance."

This, in effect, was the wheelwright's way of saying that Fondie's devotional exercises were acceptable enough to be continued. And, indeed, for close on three months afterwards Fondie went with his father twice each Sabbath day to worship, and the two worked together like sawyers for the musical edification of the faithful. It is true that Fondie's fervor never burned with the wheelwright's flame; but by the sagacious in Whivvle he was regarded as the wheelwright's proclaimed musical successor, who would some day sit in the wheelwright's seat when the wheelwright should be mere dust and memory. And who knows but this might have been so had not the spirit of restlessness and change permeated the little chapel, and sent its worshippers in pursuit of other idols. For there grew up a generation that knew not Joseph, and wearied of the simple service of its fathers, and the sound of the fiddle, and coveted after harmoniums in its heart.

The history is a long one and a bitter, and its versions vary. But it is unquestionable that the wheelwright was the last man

in Whivvle to whose ears the breath of impending change dared commit its whisper, and even then not through the lips of his fellow-worshippers—that were sealed over the secret as close as any tomb—but through the casual mouth of the Sproutgreen pig-jobber, who drove into the wheelwright's yard one morning for a repair to his spring-cart, and accosted him:

"So thoo's gettin' a harmonium at thy place o' warship an' all, Joe, same as rest."

It is not always regarded, in our part of the country, as a sign of strength to answer questions as soon as they are asked, or to espouse a topic too readily. Such verbal promptitude is held rather to indicate the weakness of the babbler or tale-bearer, ever eager after new wonders.

So, when the Sproutgreen pig-jobber said, "Thoo's gettin' a harmonium at thy place o' warship, Joe, same as rest!" the wheelwright made no answer, save to look at the newcomer as though he thought very little of him at all times, and less than usual this morning, and wiped his brow with his cap, and did a number of extraneous things before asking his client abruptly:

"What's thoo want?"

To which the pig-jobber, delaying his reply in turn whilst he sucked the flame of a match into his pipe-bowl, said:

"Look at cart back. Thoo'll see."

"I'se ower mich wark ti look at onnything," the wheelwright returned. "I can't be bothered wi' her. Look at cart for thysen."

"Why, I ev looked at her," the pig-jobber replied, still puffing at his pipe, with his eyes a-squint upon the bowl, "or I shouldn't 'a brought her, Joe?"

"Thoo comes just when thoo sees I'se throng," the wheelwright complained.

"Thoo's nivver owt else," said the pig-jobber complacently. "Thoo stands ti be makin' thy fortune, nobbut thoo's half as mich wark as thoo reckons thoo has. Noo then! Get at

her, Joe. Dean't let's waste time. I'se a lang day i' front o' me."

And the job was nearly finished before the wheelwright reverted to the pig-jobber's opening words and asked:

"Who telt thee aboot harmonium?"

The pig-jobber mentioned a public-house or two, at which the wheelwright commented sagely: "There's nobody knaws syke a deal as them that knaws nowt."

But when the pig-jobber drove out of the yard with white wood showing at the tailboard of his cart, and new hinges, the wheelwright dusted one palm significantly against another as he was wont to do after cuffing a head, and that same dinner hour his legs bore him rapidly round Whivvle, and his brow was formidable with dark and imprisoned thoughts as is the studded door of a gaol.

"I'll know rights on it!" he muttered as he walked, and when his step was heard upon the cobbles behind Bless Allcot's kitchen yard, and Bless Allcot's wife caught sight of his beard through the window-pane in helping her husband to potatoes, and said:

". . . Why! it's Joe Bassiemoor. What's bringin' him this time o' day, I wonder?"

. . . One of the versions says that Bless Allcot turned the color of skimmed milk, and put his hands hurriedly together as though in the act of saying grace.

The wheelwright wasted no time and few words. The kitchen door was open, and he laid one hand on each jamb, and he put his head in like a hawk, without ceremony or good-day, and asked: "What's all this about, Bless Allcot?"

Bless Allcot, according to the same version, feigned to be putting some potato, beef, cabbage, and mustard into his mouth—that were all piled up in preparation, along six inches of knife-blade, and peppered to boot—but the version declares he never meant to eat them in the wheelwright's presence, for the food would have choked him.

"What! Is it thoo, Joe?" he said feebly. "We've just gotten agate [started] wi' dinner."

"Thoo sees it's me," the wheelwright pronounced in a voice of denunciation. "An' thoo knaws it's me, for thoo heard me comin', an' thy missus looked oot o' winder and telt thee it was me. So thoo's n' occasion ti ask, 'Is it thee, Joe?' Who else is it like ti be?"

Bless Allcot, making a spasmodic feint at his mouth with the knife-blade, and lowering the latter to the plate again, said uneasily, "Why . . . thoo's welcome, Joe."

"I dean't care whether I'se welcome or I isn't welcome," the wheelwright declared, "an' thoo wadn't tek trouble ti tell me I was welcome nobbut thoo knawed very well I wasn't—I want ti know what's this aboot harmonium. That's what I want ti know."

At the mention of "harmonium" all the intelligence fell away from Bless Allcot's visage in a piece, as if it had been stucco from an old wall, leaving nothing but void and blankness behind. He repeated the word with lips that seemed able to derive no comprehension from it.

"Harmonium, Joe?" said he.

"Aye! Harmonium!" the wheelwright cried, in a voice that sounded as though it gave the word a contemptuous cuff in ejecting it. "Thoo heard me fair enough. Thoo knaws all about her. Thoo knaws as much about her as onny man i' Whivvle."

"Why . . ." Bless Allcott admitted discreetly, "there's been a bit o' talk about her, yan time or another, so far as that gans, Joe."

"Then thoo's i' favor on her?" the wheelwright demanded darkly.

"Nay! Thoo shouldn't snap words oot o' my mouth, Joe," Bless Allcot protested. "It's not what I favors nor what thoo favors. It's what Lord favors, wi' His help an' His guidance. We're in His 'ands, Joe. Thoo can't deny it. Thoo's said

same thysen, many a time, i' Lord's Ooose, an' folks has said Amen tiv it."

"Who's at bottom on it?" asked the wheelwright luridly. "Is it thoo, Bless Allcot?"

Bless Allcot blinked his eyes at the aspersion as if it had been an onion. When he prayed in public he had only to squeeze his red eyelids and water came. He could draw water from this source when every pump in Whivvle was dry, and it was a current saying in the district, if a pump went off: "Thoo mun get Bless Allcot ti pray ower her. Thoo'll 'a water enough then."

"Thoo's a hard man, Joe," he said, though in tones sufficiently attenuated to add no further fuel to the wheelwright's wrath. "Thoo won't believe what's telt thee. Thoo won't see Lord's finger i' onnything."

"Lord's finger!" cried the wheelwright. "When thoo's a lass larnin' music at five shillin' a quarter, an' a harmonium an' all stood i' yon parlor aback o' yon door—nobbut thoo'd open it!" To Bless Allcot's wife the wheelwright said, "Hod thy noise, woman. Nobody speaks ti theel!"—and she held it so well that he had only to tell her once again during the whole interview.

But the interview was barren, and—for the wheelwright—as profitless as the parabolic fig-tree. Bless Allcot yielded no fruits of anger or contrition. His wet eyes and Christian meekness seemed proof against all injury or assault. He said, "Thoo's been unjust, Joe, but a Christian mun forgive. Thoo's said some hard things. Thoo'll think better o' thysen, mebbe, after thoo's said thy prayers a time or two."

And the wheelwright, striding forth among the Brethren, robed in righteous anger and injured dignity, the wind of his motion spreading the tresses of his beard and mantling him to the knees in its Mosaic splendor, slowly awoke to the futility of unresisted wrath. The Brethren were as water, that opens to the arm cleaving it, and closes again relentlessly behind.

The harmonium became a mockery; the echo of an echo, that, pursued to its source, yields no response.

But the wheelwright warred in a lost cause, and knew it. In those days it was said his countenance grew terrible to look on, and few looked on it—among the Brethren—but were obliged.

And all the versions agree that the matter was submitted to arbitration by prayer, and all but one say that the Spirit of the Lord descended upon the Brethren, but that one asks (not irrelevantly) what else the Spirit was likely to do when the harmonium stood in Bless Allcot's parlor all polished up in readiness for delivery.

And Bless Allcot and Albert Brammer together took her by night over the foot-bridge into the chapel as soon as it was dusk enough to rob recognition of most of her terrors. Jack Bennett from Sproutgreen and the miller's second lass were seated on the handrail at the time, and had to get off the bridge to let them go by.

So Bless Allcot's old harmonium with three keys lacking—though Bless Allcot said they were no hin-detament to the sound of her, and he knew very well they were all three somewhere inside, having heard them rattle when they crossed the bridge—passed to the community for the same sum that Bless Allcot had given for her fifteen months before.

Three pounds fifteen was the price at which the instrument changed hands, and Bless Allcot said nobbut it had been for the Lord's arm, and the voice of the Spirit bidding him what to do, like, he wouldn't have let her go under double that amount; she had improved that mich sin' his daughter began ti play her.

Half a dozen of the Brethren had called to inspect her previously, at Bless Allcot's house, in their Sunday clothes, walking with stiff necks because of their collars, and going the longest way round through fear of meeting the wheelwright, and lined up along the parlor wall as if the occasion had been an inquest,

holding their hats in their hands, and coughing into each other's ears with their sideways Sunday coughs. And Bless Allcot's daughter seated herself to the harmonium with a face like the burning of Moscow, and played them Sankey and Moody's hymns—or the three in particular she knew the best, having practiced for the occasion—and Bless stood with his arm on the harmonium facing the Brethren and interpreting to them by the juiciness of his eyes the beatitude of the music, that might have been acute lumbago by the way he bore it, saying:

"Aye, aye! Amen! Noo, wi ye! What did I tell ye? Was I speakin' truth? Ev I said a word i' her praise ower many?"

And the Brethren, abashed before that syrupy and beatific eye, and overwhelmed with the burden of responsibility laid upon their Sunday shoulders, lowered their own eyes before Bless Allcot's fervor as though they had been unworthy to exchange looks with such a heaven-irradiated orb, and murmured:

"She's gotten a gran tone."

And Bless said:

"There's not another i' this part of the world wi' syke a tone!"—which was true, and just as well.

And when they had laid their hands upon her, decorously and reverently touching her person at the request of Bless Allcot, who said:

"Tek hold on her an' examine her for yoursens. She'll bide it. I'se not frightened. Lord sees inti oor hearts. There's nowt underhand aboot business. I'se not pressing ye ti buy. Ye can tek her or leave her. Lass dizzn't want me ti let her go. But if ye dean't tek her this time it'll be last chance ye'll get."

When these things had been done, and these words uttered, Nunk besought the vendor to ask a blessing on her, which the vendor did.

With the three pounds fifteen received from the Brethren his daughter paid the first deposit on a brand-new harmonium that she had already provisionally selected in Hunmouth on

the three years' or deferred payment system. It had eight stops, including two dummies, and a *vox humana*, or inhuman voice, so called because by means of it the harmonium could be made to imitate the bleating of a goat, and was the nearest thing in sounds to the sight of Bless Allcot's eyes when he wrung liquid piety out of them.

And Bless Allcot's daughter was to receive two pounds a year for conducting the musical part of the service every Sabbath. This portion of the arrangement came with a shock upon the Brethren, who were base enough to pretend that they had not understood it, but Bless invoked the Lord's arm once more, and the Spirit, and the Brethren were hopelessly overpowered.

There were two grand special services to commemorate the installation of the harmonium, and the cobbler from Sprout-green walked all the way to Whivle in a parson's hat and a white tie, to tell folk what a sinful life he had led in his younger days, and how, but for the Living Word, he might probably have been wearing a gray coat and colored kerchief to this day, and been even as the other sinners whom he had met this morning bicycling along the road to Hell. And Bless Allcot's eyes were as wet as cut lemons, and he thanked the Lord for having spared him to see this day—though it can have been little he saw of it with his eyes in such a fluid and obstructed condition—and he shook hands with everything that looked like a hand as the congregation dispersed, and thanked the worshippers for coming, and said this was a glorious day for the Lord, and his heart rejoiced to see them. And at both services he prayed in the key of G flat minor for absent Brethren . . . for absent Brethren . . . whom Sickness . . . or Other Causes kept away from the Lord's House, when bidden to take part in this Bridal Feast. Beseeching that their hearts might be softened, and they might be led to see the Lord's Arm, and sinners might be brought to repentance, and light poured on them that sat in Darkness and the shadow of their own Wrath.

VII

THUS was the beginning of the wheelwright's breach with a body of which he had constituted the chief limb or main member during upwards of thirty years, and that was how Fondie came ultimately to abandon his fiddle for the practice of the harmonium—though there were other influences beside. Everybody knows that Blanche was one of them. The breach between Joe Bassiemoor and the Brethren, though patched, was never healed. For a fortnight or longer he kept up his belligerent attitude, maintaining the doctrine that Salvation was free to all, and could be had as abundantly in one's own kitchen as in any so-called place of worship smelling of pinewood and cushions—a most excellent doctrine, well worth the maintenance.

But it was clear to see through his obstinacy and asserverations the weakening of the wheelwright's anger; the burning out of his wrath. For religion, it seems, cannot be transacted in the heart alone, and he who prays in private is like him who hoards his money in a secret place, that—though he may have the covert assurance of it—brings him no interest. All the wheelwright's faith, with its accrued interest of respectability, was banked with the Primitives. To forsake this body—without transferring his spiritual account to some other well-established company—seemed like forfeiting the religious savings of years, and the Sunday came when the wheelwright donned his Sunday raiment, and ate his breakfast as if his molar teeth had been grindstones, and what they worked upon, the wicked; and after he had eaten, and given thanks in a voice that might have been mistaken at a distance for a cabman's valediction, he walked to the kitchen door and stood there awhile, and thence back to the kitchen, and so on, for a time, as though some restless fire were burning in him, until at last he said to Fondie:

"Get thoo thy hat an' come wi' me."

"Ti chapel, Joe?" his wife asked curiously.

"An' why not?" the wheelwright asked explosively. "Why shouldn't I gan ti chapel? Diz chapel belong Bless Allcot—an' Lord belong him an' all? I've as mich right there as him, or onnybody. Dost think I'se feared o' Bless Allcot? Nay, it shan't be said o' Joe Bassiemoor he was feared o' onnybody. There's not yan on 'em durst look me fair i' face—they'd slip roond onny corner fust. I'll gan ti chapel an' shame 'em. I'll shaw 'em which side Lord's on."

And he went, casting the chapel into such a hush as if he had been his own corpse, so that the praying went as dry as a duck-pond in August; and his presence seemed to invest the meeting-house with such a gloom as falls over it in the evening when a storm is brewing, and all goes dark as if the chapel had fainted, and they have to apply lighted tapers to the lamps. Bless Allcot's daughter let the wind out of the harmonium time after time, and lost all her faculty for counting how many verses there were in each hymn, and whether the Amen went after each, or at the end of all. Even Bless Allcot's juices appeared under constraint, and he sat for the most part with his head lowered as if something heavy had fallen on it. It is true he put out his hand as the wheelwright passed him at the chapel door, but he held it very low down and almost immediately made use of it to cough into, for the wheelwright took no more notice of the despised member than if it had been a blind man's mug. He walked home with Fondie in a triumphant silence, dispensing looks neither to right nor left, and said over his own roast beef:

"Aye. It's been a judgment on 'em. Lord's visited 'em. They're rightly sarved. They'll know what it is noo, wi' Bless Allcot on their backs."

Slowly, in fact, the wheelwright surrendered to his years, and though he clung to the externals of authority, and scowled at customers with concentrated animosity, it was known his reign was over. He still constituted the nominal head of his house-

hold and his littered yard, with the right of threat to lay his darkling hand about Fondie's ears (though he never did, save to the extent of a dramatic gesture retaining much of his ancient fire and force), but beneath the outward comedy of parental rule and filial submission Fondie gradually came to occupy the place of practical authority in the wheelwright's yard. And this by no process of deliberate usurpation, but by the irresistible force of public opinion. For though Whivvle still continued to call him "Fondie," and pronounced him a fool for submitting to the old man's petulance and putting up with the old man's ways, it recognized him both tacitly and overtly as the main-spring of the business, saying: "Nobbut it was for Fondie, and man mud gie up when he liked." So while the wheelwright's figure and sweeping white beard dominated nominally the yard and workshop, Whivvle craned its neck cautiously to see if Fondie were in sight, before committing itself beneath the sign-board; and instructed its emissaries not infrequently "Dean't leave it wi' aud man. Nobbut there's only him i' yard, bring job back."

And girls brought their bicycles to the yard end, and made whistling noises to attract Fondie's notice, and beckoned him to the roadway—for to take the bicycle right into the wheelwright's yard for repair looked too obviously like expecting to pay for it—and would ask Fondie, Will thoo just this, and Will thoo just that, Fondie?

And Fondie, because he was Fondie, would answer: "Why! I can nobbut try. And onnyways, I'll do my best—if you can trust her wi' me."

And Fondie's best seldom failed. Even Fondie's worst—except that he hadn't one, or at least in any region apart, perhaps, from fiddling—was no bad standard of excellence. Nor did Fondie's father go very wide of the truth when he declared contemptuously:

"Aye! Thoo warks better by half when thoo dizzn't get paid for it. Thoo's as fond as a cuddy."

VIII

WE have gone back a few steps in history to get a good beginning, as Dod does when he blows out his cheeks and runs backwards a hundred paces with intent to jump the sunk fence between his father's orchard and the paddock (though he does not always jump it then, but stops because his stocking is coming down, or because it is too hot for jumping: saying he can jump it if he likes, and mebbe he will jump it tomorrow if he thinks on).

Fondie was but fourteen—or little turned—at the time of the wheelwright's historic breach with the Body. He was barely two years older when he designed and executed the great sign-board. Before he was seventeen he had painted the public-house (unaided) two coats, and doctored up the tuberculous White Cow so skillfully that the farrier from Sproutgreen could not have put her into better fettle. Everybody that stopped outside the door said to the landlord: "Thoo's gotten a new coo then, Meggit!" and Meggit had to tell everybody: "Nay I en't. Yon's aud coo wi' a new coat. Fondie fittled her." To which the Sproutgreen pig-jobber retorted: "Aye, that she is, an' he's put 'er wi' calf an' all, Meggit"—a jest that served the bar and all Whivvle for a fortnight after, and brought the modest blush to Fondie's cheek when the district visited him. And because he was Fondie he never went once into the public bar all the while he was painting her, and when it came to the bar window he never even glanced inside, but kept his eyes glued to the brush and woodwork, as if his very soul depended on it, responding to the derisive voices that hailed him from within without transferring his gaze to the speakers. When Jerry Colman did the painting the time before he could not hear a voice or hiccough but he was down his ladder in a moment, and spent so much of his time within doors that Whivvle used to ask him, "Which side diz thoo reckon ti be painting, Jerry?"

Inside, or out?" And even the landlord, though loath to disparage a good customer—and a singer to boot—had to admit, when the job was finished, "I think it can't 'a been outside by looks on it." Nevertheless, such is the inconsistency of human nature, he was little better suited with Fondie's incorruptible industry and abstinence, which—had they emanated from anybody but Fondie—might have been prejudicial to his house and calling. "Aye, he can paint," the landlord admitted grudgingly. "Neabody says he can't. But what good is he? He's nea good ti onnybody. It would be a poor world wi nowt but syke chaps as him in it."

And before he was seventeen Fondie had painted some hundreds of palings—going down on one knee before each, like a suitor proposing marriage in Queen Victoria's time—and dozens of water-tubs, and had papered sitting-rooms, and staircases, with moss-roses and forget-me-nots; and had whitewashed ceilings, and measured people for coffins, and made two of the latter by himself (all alone in the workshop, long after it was dark outside, and only a lamp burning, and a good twenty yards between the workshop and the kitchen door, and that closed, and girls saying they wondered how he dared, and Fondie saying he'd never thought about it, and folks exclaiming: "Why! he's that fond. Onnybody wi' sense would a thought about it. He's over fond ti be afeared of owt"), and had reverently polished his mortuary handiwork until it shone like heaven, and made even the relatives realize more good qualities in the departed than they had ever done during life, to see him thus transformed; and Fondie had walked to the churchyard as a bearer, dressed in black to the knuckles, and wearing a four-inch crape band round his Sunday hat—that would not be removed, according to the usage of the district, until after the first Sunday following the funeral.

And (still before he was seventeen) Fondie had repaired all sorts of conceivable things, and had had his fingers trapped no ends of times in all sorts of conceivable machinery, and had

pondered over those vital processes of mechanism that are hid from the sight and knowledge and desires of the commonalty, and had conceived wondrous new relations of working parts, thinking them out in his bed at night when sane and sensible folk would have been sleeping; and had taken the fruits of this activity to his father in the morning, and said: "I'se jealous you'll think nowt iv idea, feythur, but I thought I mud venture tiv appeal ti your wisdom. I know you wean't misdirect me. Would ye say, noo . . ." and the wheelwright would answer without ceremony: "I'll say nowt. Hod thy noise."

Nevertheless, actuated by the resistless creative power within him, Fondie had made successively a clock, mostly of wood, with some biscuit-box and sardine-tin in her; and a model reaper. The wooden clock went for twelve hours—though she took less than five minutes to burn up; the model reaper worked her knives, and probably—on a larger scale—might have been capable of taking somebody's finger off, but Fondie's father was perhaps well within his rights when he exclaimed:

"What! Thoo's gotten tway [two] clocks i' oose, an' a watch i' thy weskit pocket, and choch clock ti gan by, an' thoo can fin' nowt better ti do but mek syke a thing as yon, when folk can buy a wakkener [alarm] for three an' six! Thoo's as soft as slap." And if Fondie had implemented a threshing machine with his own hands, to thresh corn, and blow chaff all over the foldyard, and hum like a top, and do the work that any other threshing machine did at thirty shillings a day, they would merely have accepted it as conclusive evidence of Fondie's fondness, and said:

"Lawks! She gans all reet, hooivver! Yon fellow's a fond 'un, ye may depend."

And if Fondie had played the fiddle like an angel—not that he did, or offered the least promise of doing so—they would have charged the accomplishment just as certainly to the debit side of his ledger, and winked at each other familiarly when he tucked the fiddle under his chin. For if men only laughed at

the things they understand, or that their knowledge entitled them to laugh at, there would be an end of all laughter. But (still before he was seventeen) Fondie transferred his allegiance from the fiddle proscribed by the paternal intolerance, to the not less paternally detested harmonium. He did not take this extreme course, to be sure, without submitting it filially to his father's approval, and he confessed afterwards to having done so with trepidation, but the wheelwright's growing impatience saved him, for Fondie had barely uttered the word "Feythur" in its supplicative sense, when the wheelwright cried: "Hod thy noise. Do what thoo likes. Dean't trouble me!"—and Fondie's mother said, when he appealed to her: "Thoo knows what thy feythur is. Thoo shouldn't vex him. Gan thy ways, lad, an' say nowt ni more tiv him."

With which maternal sanction Fondie, after long hesitation, went his ways and applied himself to the study of the sacred keyed instrument.

IX

TO have hinted at such a monstrous impiety as a harmonium in the house after the harmonium's treachery towards his parent would have drawn thunderbolts out of the wheelwright's beard, and Fondie had to work under all the disadvantages of secrecy and gloom. But he had looked into the mysteries of many an instrument blown by breath and bellows, and his service to the district stood him in good stead. He decided there was some analogy between the fingering of a harmonium and a concertina, and with the aid of a tattered instruction book that a Whivvle young lady lent him in return for the mending of four punctures in her back tire, and a careful attention to the movements of Miss Allcot's wrists and fingers during divine worship, Fondie arrived at a conception of the fundamental principles underlying harmonium play-

ing. Being nothing if not thorough, he took the opportunity of a broken sashcord in one of the chapel windows to measure the harmonium keyboard with a clasp-rule, and had already drawn an elaborate survey-map of the instrument in his pocket-book, when he perceived the act in its most despicable light as treachery towards his father, whereupon he tore out the offending page, and scattered its shameful pieces to the wind over the foot-bridge coming home—which shows how fond he was. But he obtained permission to run his clasp-rule over a Whivvle early-century piano, on condition that he scratched nothing, and made—according to the measurements taken—a wonderful fingerboard of close on three octaves on which to practice and habituate his fingers to their new duties. Each white key bore its own letter, painted on it in a legible capital, and all the white keys worked on a spring, but not the black, because, as Fondie said: "I'se jealous I shan't need them yet, of a while."

The springs were very strong; each would have been capable of working a rat-trap, Fondie's contention being: "Nobbut I can yance larn ti finger these, I ought ti be able ti finger onny."

On this ingenious instrument Fondie practiced five-finger exercises and psalm tunes in silence, and achieved such a theoretic victory over music's mechanical side that when his aunt, not to be outdone by Bless Allcot's daughter, bid for and bought the harmonium at the Vicar of Riswick's sale, to serve as a Bible and pelargonium stand in her front parlor, Fondie was able to identify most of the keys by name, saying: "Here's C, aunt," and "Yon's F, unless I'se very much mistaken," and "I wouldn't like ti say this isn't G, but color's different fro' what I'se used ti." And he was able to play the opening chords of several hymns upon it, which threw his aunt into a pious frame of mind, so that she folded her hands as firmly as if the collecting-plate were coming round to her pew, and made her mouth the size of a threepenny-bit, which is an appropriate size and shape for piety.

"If anything happens me," she told Fondie, "harmonium'll be yours."

Fondie said he hoped she wouldn't be his "of many a long year."

"I'se not si young as I was," his aunt confessed, reconciled by this state of exaltation to thoughts of demise; present happiness being a powerful digestive of prospective sorrows. "It's not i' nature o' things I can live si much longer. Lord may be sendin' for me at onny time noo; I'se nobbut a year younger than Joe."

Fondie hoped, with the drawn face which was always at his service on such occasions, that the Lord might manage to get on without her "of a long piece" yet.

"House will be yours an' all," his aunt went on, drawn by the harmonium and the hymns and the resultant piety into the well-worn testamentary track once more, that she had trodden—and would continue to tread—many a time with Fondie. Fondie was pledged to make her coffin—that should be a smoothed oak coffin with the heaviest brass fittings and an embossed nameplate. At one time this sacred commission had been lodged with Fondie's father, but with the whitening of the wheelwright's beard, and the deepening of his gloom, she had transferred the obligation to Fondie's more sympathetic and accommodating shoulders. And Fondie knew the exact spot in the green churchyard where his aunt desired to sleep when her earthly work was done. It changed from time to time, as other Whivvle sleepers forestalled her, encroaching on the space desired, and bringing neighbors to the cherished vicinity in whose company she could not comfortably lie. The wheelwright's sister, not unlike the wheelwright's self, was an individual of strong prejudices—so strong, indeed, that they survived the very thoughts of defunction, and had driven her disquietedly all around the churchyard, from one contaminated quarter after another, in quest of her ultimate sleeping-place. She could not rest easy in her coffin, she said, to think that she should be laid

next door to Sarah This, or John That, and the glorious Republic of Christian Souls, reinforced by the whole host of Saints and Martyrs, failed to subdue this prejudice. It extended even to her choice of tombstones. She could not bide to think she should be put under a three-step cross and curb now that Mrs. Marston had got one; nor would she have the text on her tomb and funeral card that had been spoiled by Elizabeth Reed.

All of which changes in her testamentary desires were notified to Fondie's sympathetic ear.

For Fondie's aunt was not among Fondie's detractors, and had Fondie gone to practice the harmonium in her parlor four times a week in place of the customary twice, he would have been welcome—so long as he scrubbed his boots with the same care, and put back the oilcloth and the antimacassar and three wool mats, and the big Bible—gilt clasp outward—and the vase of dried grasses, and the two jangling lusters upon the harmonium when he had finished, and taken back to the kitchen the dust-sheet his aunt's punctilious forethought had spread over the carpet for him to tread on. As to the fingerboard with the spring keys, it disappeared one evening after Fondie had been prevailed on to bring it down to the workshop for the inspection of a visitor. Fondie sought it everywhere, and asked everybody except his father if they had seen it; but nobody had, and he never appealed to the wheelwright, and the wheelwright never volunteered any word to him, for all he once saw Fondie turning over shavings with his foot, and moving planes, and spoke-shaves, and peering about the bench and lathes, asking petulantly at last:

"What's thoo lost?"

To which Fondie tactfully replied:

"I'se not sure I'se lost onnything, feythur."

"Get on wi' thy wark, then," the wheelwright ordered him, "till thoo's made up thy mind whether thoo has or thoo hasn't."

To have made a second fingerboard, even on better principles,

with the experience gained from the first, would have savored to Fondie of flat rebellion towards Providence and his parent, and so he submitted to the dispensation, though more than once he deplored (to himself) his loss, saying:

"I could a practiced hymns i' my bedroom wi'oot disturbing nobody."

Fondie's love of music was proverbial. He himself acknowledged the quality as a sort of inverted demerit, saying he knew he was fonder of it than syke as him should be, though he mud feel thankful it hadn't been Drink. Two hours were as naught to Fondie when he seated himself at his aunt's harmonium, and he always bestowed extra and reverent attention upon the painting of any window of any room that had a piano in it.

In Whivvle it used to be said of him that he could bide music as long as a sow could bide scratching, yet there are those who contend that this passion alone did not account for his sudden attachment to the harmonium, and that from the first he was actuated by deeper motives than mere music. Fondie, indeed, scarcely denied it, although Fondie's acceptance of an impeachment by no means proved its truth, for his humility was prepared to acknowledge nearly anything affirmed against his merit and if one had accused him openly of being a thief, Fondie would have confessed:

"Why, I misdoot I'se not mich better. There's not syke a deal o' difference betwixt wanting a thing, an' tekking it. If I en't taen, it's mebbe only because there wasn't enough ti tempt me. What'll tempt yan man wean't tempt another, an' before one judges anybody for what he diz I think we should know what was pushin' at back on him when he did it."

The news that Fondie's temptation had come in the guise of the church organ, and that he was actually to play the service for a couple of Sundays, caused something like a stir in Whivvle. But it made Fondie's musical aspirations plain to the meanest intelligence. The wise said: "Why! What did ye expect? What did we tell ye?"—not that they ever did. "That's what

he's been after all time." Some demanded what the wheelwright was thinking of to let him. "Joe reckons ti be Primiti'. You may depend he'll 'a summut ti say." But all Joe Bassiemoor said, when Fondie preferred the customary formula for parental sanction was: "Hod thy fond tongue. Do what thoo wants ti do, an' dean't bother me"—which was as good a sanction as the most filial-minded of sons might wish for. And besides, the wheelwright was now visibly assuming the attributes of old age; his authority, that once active and vehement thing, was relapsed into a passive and contemptuous state that scorned altercation and deigned not to parley.

Some insinuated that the wheelwright was secretly gratified with his son's ecclesiastical distinction, and that his open scorn was but the cunning mantle to a hypocritical pride, for after Fondie played the American organ it was noticed that Joe Bassiemoor relapsed into a systematic Sabbath Oncer, and his beard was to be looked for at evening worship only in the event of his having been absent from the morning. Bless Allcot said: "An' it's him that called me a chochman wi' his own lips. Who's chochman noo? But Joe Bassiemoor was nivver a true Believer." And his eyes grew very wet with Christian charity and forgiveness, but there were equally those who said both he and his daughter were glad of Fondie's defection from the Body, for Bless Allcot's daughter was heard to complain that Fondie did nothing but stare at her when she played the hymns, and how could anybody play properly, and remember to pedal at the same time, with somebody else's eye fixed on her back. If it had been any other than Fondie she would have suspected him of honorable intentions, and bought, maybe, some fresh ribbon for her hat, but it was too well recognized in Whivvle that Fondie did not know what lasses were for, and all Miss Allcot accused him of was jealousy.

And though Bless Allcot prayed in chapel for Infidels and Unbelievers and Lost Sheep on the day that Fondie took the first service at church, and all knew that his prayer meant

Fondie and the wheelwright, there were those among his closest enemies who said he was glad to be rid of both, and the week afterwards he threw out his first hint that the playing of a harmonium and the blowing of her an' all, twice each Sunday for fifty-two Sundays in the year, was hard work, and took a deal out of a lass, to say nothing about wear and tear to skirts, and though he wasn't complaining, "the Lord seed inti his heart. What was two pun? Did not the Lord love a cheerful giver? And was not this His work, and had He not told us the laborer should be paid?" So the salary was reassessed at three pounds, and little enough (said Bless Allcot). "It couldn't very well be onny less. But we mun act Christian an' do what we can ti help Cause, an' bring sinners ti the Lamb. Lass didn't ask for nowt. It's nobbut what you gied her voluntary, ye know very well, an' if it hadn't been a sixpence she'd a sarved Lord just same, and as willing."

X

FOR a season Fondie figured in the sight of Whivvle as an apostate, and even individuals of the most unrecognized spirituality, whose nexus with any organized form of public faith was of the slightest, assumed the righteous indignation of Primitives on meeting him and exclaimed:

"Thoo's a nice chap!"

To which Fondie, with a troubled and contrite countenance, would answer humbly:

"You mean choch organ?"

"Nay I don't!" his self-constituted judge would retort. "I mean thoo for playin' on her. Thoo needn't go for ti blame orgin. What's thoo got ti do wi' choch?"

"Why, I misdoot you'll say I'se i' some ways ti blame," Fondie acknowledged. "But I seemed as though I couldn't do nowt ni less. They asked me."

"An couldn't thoo a' said no?" Whivvle demanded of him sternly.

"Why?" said Fondie. "I expect you'll say I ought tiv a done."

But he confessed that he did not care "ower a deal" for the word "no" at any time, and especially when folk was i' trouble—for all Bless Allcot declared that Hell was filled with folk that couldn't say no when they should have done. "No," indeed, was the last answer Fondie could make to anybody, and there are no historic proofs that he ever did when anything was demanded of his kindness—least of all to Blanche.

For it was Blanche's own self that came swinging into the yard to seek him, and flashed her big white teeth imperturbably before the wheelwright's tow-colored beard, and asked as bold as brass for Fondie, and—since the wheelwright did not immediately vouchsafe an answer to her question—found Fondie for herself in the workshop, where she took hold of him by the coat sleeve as intimately as if he had been a door-handle—Fondie saying that it was a warm afternoon, to account for the color of his face, which (by the feel of it) he knew to be crimson; though this to Blanche presented no extraordinary feature, since it was the color she usually knew him by—and told him without ceremony:

"Fondie, you've got to play the organ on Sunday."

And Fondie answered in a voice of sudden misgiving, that gave way under him like a loose stair-board:

"Ye wean't mean choch organ, Miss Blanche?"

Blanche said, "Of course she did. Fondie must play it. He'd have to play it. He'd got to play it."

Fondie explained, with increasing color and gravity, he misdooted somebody had gien Miss Blanche a wrong idea of his ability, and he wasn't what syke as her would understand by being a player—and the modesty exuded from his forehead in globules, and his collar stuck to his neck through anxiety to convince Miss Blanche how unworthy he was, but Blanche said

Oh, she knew all about that, and she didn't mind a bit how badly he played. It would be good enough for father, anyway. Miss Bryce (said she) was ill. (Silly old fool!) And father had said Blanche must play the organ on Sundays; she'd been learning music long enough, and it was high time she did something with it; and Blanche was sure she wouldn't, and if the worst came to the worst she meant to be ill or something on Sunday, and stop in bed all day. She didn't care. She wasn't frightened of him. She wasn't going to make a fool of herself before all the people, not for father or anybody else.

But Fondie must do it. Father couldn't say anything to *him*, whatever Fondie did. Father couldn't grumble about all the money for *his* music being wasted, and he'd been a bitter disappointment to him (as he would say to Blanche), and she would have to go out as mother's help or nursery governess if anything happened to him. He was always plaguing Blanche to play his old organ. Blanche didn't want to play his old organ. And Blanche didn't mean to play his old organ, and so he knew.

And before Fondie could stop her or interpolate any substantial objection, she was saying: "So that's all right!"—though it wasn't. "You've promised, Fondie!"—though Fondie never had. And she would tell father, and father would let him know the hymns. And Fondie only heard himself murmuring in a helpless and ineffectual undertone that he misdooted there'd be ower many flats and sharps for him to manage, to which Blanche answered with cheerful confidence that he was to manage all he could, and leave the others out, as *she* would certainly do. She didn't mind how many he left out. He could leave them all out for what *she* cared. Nobody would notice. Nor did Fondie's murmured objection that he misdooted he didn't know choch service disturb her equanimity to any greater degree. She said he needn't want to know it, and she wished she didn't know it either. She was sick of the old service. All Fondie had to do was to keep

his ears open and listen out for the Amens. Not that it mattered much if he missed them. Miss Bryce often did. Blanche didn't care.

And Fondie's other objections, each weaker than the last through his fatal yearning to oblige, were dismissed in turn, and he said he would do his best, and Blanche said, "All right. Sunday then. Don't you go and forget."

Had Fondie been half a man he would have stipulated for a kiss at least—for everybody in Whivvle knew he could have done with one, but he wanted it too badly to ask for it; and he hadn't the common courage to take it, although Blanche's big white teeth were displayed within six inches of his lips at the time. If he had been half a man—for there was nobody in the workshop at the time, except the two of them, amid the seductive warm scent of fresh pine shavings—Fondie would have taken one quick peep through the bull's-eye window glass to make sure his father's beard was appropriately turned, and then thrown both arms round Blanche's neck and held on. Blanche would only have whispered, "Shut up, Fondie! Fondie, you silly fool!" and Fondie would have whispered, "Who's a fool?" between the kisses, and Blanche would have answered, "You, you fool!" struggling with just sufficient discretion to give his kisses the requisite raptorial flavor, so that both—with a little imagination—might profess to believe the kisses were snatched, whilst she called him "You great fool, Fondie!" lots of times, and smacked his kiss-flushed cheeks provocatively when he let her go, as though daring him to do it again, and perhaps (who knows) have taken him by the coat lapel and stuck one of the flowers she generally carried in her belt for the purpose into Fondie's buttonhole and said, "I'll never speak to you any more, Fondie!" and Fondie would (or might) have answered, "Till when?" prompting her, "Till next time?"—and who knows how differently Whivvle history might have had to be written and depicted on Dod's slate. For that one kiss, or the lack of it, is altering lives the whole

world over; and lips too reckless, or lips too shy, can change destinies as utterly as any conqueror's sword.

But Fondie did not do what Fondie might have done. If he had, it is certain he would not have been Fondie. All he did was to harp on his own unworthiness—as though Blanche cared to be bothered with that; and the wish that he had more skill to justify her confidence in him—as though she had any; and the undertaking to do his best—as though Blanche bothered her head with the degrees of comparison. He asked Blanche if she thought she could induce her father to pick some easy hymns for Sunday, including "Conquering Kings" and "Onward, Christian Soldiers"—and Blanche said she thought she could—without the least confidence or responsibility. But she couldn't, for her father was too grieved with her to consider anybody's feelings but his own, and said he was bitterly disappointed in her, and he had no comfort in his children, and all the other things that Blanche was prepared for, so that she told him: "Oh, shut up. You're always preaching. I'm sick of the old music," and he had to reprove her: "Blanche! Is that the way to speak to your father?" and Blanche said, "Yes, it is!"—though with her lips closed, so that he should not hear her. And Blanche was so injured in turn that she would not condescend to ask him to set down "Conquering Kings" and "Onward, Christian Soldiers" or any other hymns, but looked the numbers up when he was gone, and altered his figures—making threes into eights, and ones into sevens—just to pay him out; including a hymn for the burial of those at sea, and another in four sharps, to the end that Fondie might play his worst, which Fondie duly did.

XI

AND that was how Fondie came to be a churchman, for Miss Bryce died and was buried in foreign parts—some say Lancashire—miles and miles away from our history and the placid sound of Whivle's three bells—to whose complacent music she had so often buttoned her cotton gloves on a Sunday.

Fondie played the Dead March for her with his wonted humility, saying it was the best he could do, and he misdoubted a poor one, and he wished she might have been spared another month so that he could have played it better. It is not true he was glad of her demise, for all Bless Allcot said: "Lord giveth an' Lord tekketh away. Blessed be name o' the Lord. Yon chap's gotten his wish noo. Will *that* content him!" The Vicar himself asked Fondie to go on playing just for a Sunday or two more—until Blanche should be ready to take over the organ, and Fondie said if the Vicar deemed him worthy he would, and the Sundays went by—whole shoals of them—and Blanche declared: "He needn't think *I'm* going to take his fusty old organ for him, for I aren't." And she didn't.

Bless Allcot received a shock one morning when he heard that Fondie had been appointed church organist at a salary of seven pound ten a year, and blowing found. "An' Primiti's give my lass three pun!" he cried in his indignation. "An' she's got ti blow for hersen. How div they expeck onny blessing ti fall on syke worship?"—but the report was unfounded, for Fondie got nothing, which Bless Allcot averred was as much as he was worth. The rumor of this handsome salary reached even to the wheelwright's ears before it was stopped, and it was not stopped even them, for it went round the parishes begging credence like a tramp after work in haymaking time.

"What!" cried Whivvle to the wheelwright. "Thy Fondie gets seven pun ten for playing choch orgin! Aye, it's well ti turn chochman!"

"More fools them," exclaimed the wheelwright, "for giein' on it."

But the first thing he did on next seeing Fondie was to tax him angrily:

"Then thoo gets money for playing choch orgin?"

And when Fondie answered meekly:

"Nay, father. I'se not come ti that yet," the wheelwright retorted:

"More fool thoo. Thoo'd let onnybody snatch bread oot o' thy mouth."

At first Fondie only played hymns and final Amens in the key of G, and gave the Vicar his note for the Lord's Prayer and Responses—Willim Sidmouth sitting by his side, ready to push his elbow and say: "Noo then! What's thoo waitin' on?" or pluck his wrist and say: "Hod on. Vicar's not fit yet," or nudge him violently in the ribs and exclaim in a penetrating whisper: "Thoo should 'a gone when I telt thee!" so that worshippers might attribute the mistake to Fondie, especially in those instances where Fondie had not been responsible for it.

But before many weeks had thus slipped by, the Vicar decided that they ought to resume the singing of the Venite; and after the Venite he called for the Te Deum, and very shortly Fondie was neck-deep in all the tribulations of a church organist—pointing the psalms and experiencing the pitfalls of the double chant and odd verse, and the awful feeling that accompanies the falling into it, as if one had slipped off the belfry ladder in the dark. All this while Blanche was reputed to be taking special notice of the points of worship, and practicing the hymns and chants for each Sunday as though herself, and not Fondie, were to be the organist; but for all that she behaved during divine worship no differently from before, and displayed her big white teeth or hid them, alternately, in the pages of her prayer-

book, as much as ever. Only her father for one moment believed that Blanche would some day sit seriously in the place that Fondie occupied and take the service. Certainly no one else in Whivvle did.

Whivvle knew at once when Blanche had refused to practice, or had been found with a penny novelette spread out on the pianoforte desk whilst she reputedly played the Psalms, for whenever God's blessings failed at home the Vicar put on his dusty hat with the grease-imprinted thumb-marks over the flabby brim, and went in quest of them abroad, saying the only comfort he had was in his parish, visiting the sick, and calling upon the infirm in order to tell them that we all have our secret sorrows, and that sickness is not everything, and that the Lord knows all our hearts—in which he was at one with Bless Allcot, albeit less juicy about the mouth and eyes.

Then Blanche, coming upon the traces of her father's footsteps later, would ask Whivvle with her undaunted smile:

"What's he been saying?"

And if Whivvle happened to be Fondie, answering her very tactfully and respectfully—for Fondie never made trouble between party and party—"Why, not a very deal, Miss Blanche. He spoke about psalms and hymns for Sunday."

". . . And about *me* too!" Blanche would throw in. "I know. You can't say he hasn't. I know what he's been talking about."

And if Fondie ventured to suggest, without actually saying so, that she was, maybe, mistaken, Blanche would come close up to him and challenge him to look her straight in the eyes and say her father hadn't mentioned her—as though Fondie dared look straight into her eyes at any time. He would as soon have thought of looking into her bedroom. And if Fondie elected to reply with humility that he wouldn't like to deny anything he wasn't very sure of, Blanche would extend her smile with triumphant mockery, telling Fondie: "No! Because you dursn't. You know it's true. He's been telling you

all about it. I don't care if he has. He can say what he likes. I aren't going to. So he knows."

And she would apostrophize her father as a Silly Old Fool—as though any blessing under any form of theology whatsoever, whether the Vicar's, or Deacon Smeddy's, or Bless Allcot's, or anybody else's, could descend where such undutiful daughter-ship or flat irreverence was. And because Fondie never encouraged her in this disobedience, or purchased her favor at the cost of his filial principles, she would call Fondie a Silly Fool too, and say she didn't care for anybody, and would go off jauntily swinging her skirts to right and left, and touching walls and palings with her open hands as she passed them, and plucking the roadside grasses as she walked, and biting them defiantly with her resolute teeth.

And if the Whivvle she took leave of happened to be Fondie it sighed to itself, and went on mutely with its work, and never looked over its shoulders after her as the more sensible Whivvle would have done, feeling that such surreptitious scrutiny was not respectful to the Vicar's daughter), nor winked when she turned round (for the same ridiculous reason)—which, had it only whistled, she would have done at once.

XII

BLANCHE, of course, was the Vicar's daughter—as indeed her open disrespect of him and of the Church sufficiently testified. She was not, however, his only child. Providence had seen fit to visit the Vicar with a large family, but this had been brought off in two separate broods, like blackbirds, of which the first was fledged and dispersed before Blanche cracked the shell of destiny and opened her blue eye to the brightness of blue heaven. She had three grown-up brothers in various parts of the world, who might as well have been strangers for all she saw of them, or all

they meant to her; and she had two married sisters who came to Whivvle now and again—generally after confinement, with pinched cheeks and sharp nose-ends—bringing the latest baby to sleep in its bassinet on the vicarage lawn, and cry inconsolably at nights, and make Blanche say it was sickening, and she would be glad when they were gone, and she didn't care.

And Blanche had a sister and two brothers by the second brood. The sister married one of farmer Broadley's sons, who failed at farming within the twelvemonth, and went off to Canada in the hope that farming might thrive better on Canadian beer—which perhaps it did, but no one knew for certain, and in such cases it is justifiable to think the worst, since the worst makes a far more suitable topic for conversation. Ultimately Blanche's sister went out to rejoin her husband on very insufficient grounds, saying he had written for her—though not even her father saw the letter. She paid her own passage money to Canada—or at least her father did, for Farmer Broadley unequivocally refused to contribute the least part of it, demanding: "What's use o' throwing good money after bad? Let lass stop where she is. She's as well at vicarage as onnywheers."

Of Blanche's two remaining brothers, one was in an accountant's office in Hunmouth, and wore cuffs and buttonholes, and went to the music-hall twice a week, and came home by the last train smelling of cigar—or bicycled all the way when the roads were reasonable, and the office work kept him later than as a rule. This brother's name was Harold, but Whivvle generally spoke of him as Starchy—probably because of his cuffs. The second brother, who was two years younger than Blanche, went to the Whivvle school, and wore corduroy breeches, and broke windows with catapults, and used bad language, and was nearly as reckless as Blanche; albeit he was not a bit like Blanche, and nobody else was a bit like Blanche, and Blanche was the only one of all the Vicar's family that mattered, or was worth the while.

Strictly speaking, for all their whiteness and regularity, there is no doubt that Blanche's teeth were too big. At least there is no doubt they would have been too big for anybody but Blanche, and they were even too big for Blanche in one way, for she could never comfortably close her lips over them, and when she succeeded in doing so her face looked altogether different, and not a bit like Blanche, and the big teeth burst out between the lips next moment in an assertive laughter that would not be denied; big, sound, filbert-shaped teeth set all round her mouth in a superb horseshoe; every tooth as sound as a bell, and as white as bleached ivory. Only one other set of teeth in Whivvle could vie with them for regularity, and that belonged to Fondie's aunt. But Fondie's aunt's teeth were of a pale porcelain blue, much admired in company, so that her mouth had almost the effectiveness of a china cabinet, and she took as much care of the teeth inside as if they had been old Chelsea, never sneezing without her handkerchief, or—if she knew herself to be sitting on it and time pressing—with her hand held firmly over them to reduce the risk of concussion, and refusing all plum-cake other than her own for fear the fruit had been carelessly stoned. But Fondie's aunt was an elderly maiden lady who had long since said good-bye to the follies, if not the vanities, of life, and she would no more have thought of jeopardizing her teeth in one of Blanche's reckless smiles than she would have dreamed of wearing her Sunday gloves to go a-shopping on a weekday, or of brewing tea in the ornamental Spathorpe teapot that stood in the front parlor on the corner bracket that Fondie's skill had made and fixed for her, to commemorate a day trip of forty years before. She disapproved of Blanche's bold and shameless teeth, perpetually displayed, and of Blanche's laughing, never steadfast eyes; and of Blanche's profligate golden hair, that Blanche shook like a horse's mane, when loose, and of Blanche's cheap Birmingham jewelry with which Blanche adorned her person in open disregard of her father's express command; brooches and rings

composed of glass rubies, and the tinniest of bangles—won, some of them, from the Penny Pull at Hunmouth Fair by the skill of her different admirers—no two alike, that she wore upon her wrists on glad occasions. And what she wore at any time did not constitute more than the quarter of what she had had, or the half of what her father had impounded or destroyed.

Even now and then, generally as the result of indignation engendered by Blanche's lack of musical diligence, the Vicar woke up out of his vicarial torpor to a consciousness of her jewelry and the responsibilities of parenthood, and pointed an incensed forefinger at the tinny baubles on Blanche's wrists and bosom, demanding how she had come by them, and if he had not expressly forbidden her to wear such things. Periodically, if his wrath had been very hot, and Blanche had fed it with the fuel of many undaughterly words, he would commit her brooches and her bangles and her glassy turquoises and ruby rings to the flame. At other times, his anger expended, and his energies at an end, he merely locked them up in his untidy whatnot, and Blanche got them out again next day, either with the Vicar's key, or with another key she knew of that fitted nearly as well; and discreetly, a ring or a bangle at a time, re-assembled the proscribed articles about her person in readiness for the next forfeiture. Once she confided a whole collection of recovered jewelry to Fondie's embarrassed hands before Fondie understood rightly what they were, saying: "Here. Take hold of them, Fondie, and keep them for me against I ask you for them, so I can tell him I haven't got them, and how do I know where they are!"

And Fondie did it, though he misdoctored whether he was doing right, and whether the Vicar would ever repose confidence in him again if he got to know, and whether Miss Blanche wouldn't be better advised to take them back where they came from. To which Blanche retorted: "Oh, shut up. I shan't. They're mine, not his. What does he want with

them! They're no business of his. They were given me, not him. Mind that ring, Fondie, the ruby's loose."

Incidentally, too, she called Fondie a silly fool, which Fondie would have been the last to deny, or to object to from Blanche's lips, not that it would have made the least difference if he had done so. Besides, after all, it was better to be called a silly fool by Blanche than many a better name by many better people.

XIII

EVERYBODY in Whivvle knew Blanche, and most of them called her by name—except Fondie, whose modesty never so much as dreamed of aspiring to such a high and starlike privilege, but addressed her "Miss" and "Miss Blanche" under all circumstances, as naturally as he would take up his gravy on the knife-blade, without for a moment contemplating any other way.

For Blanche was Whivvle born and bred, and had practiced all her imperfections in the sight of Whivvle ever since she had been of an age to exhibit any. In the country no faults are hid; they can be no more concealed than acres, and each man knows his neighbors' blemishes as well as he knows his sheep, and can say which beasts are whose in every field. One might as well endeavor to reap a wheat crop or keep a pig without one's neighbors' knowledge as to disguise a shortcoming. Even before she had entered that archipelago of feminine difficulties called the teens, Blanche had made a reputation for herself that went much further than the boundaries of her father's parish. Whivvle could distinguish Blanche half a mile or more away, and would point her out to itself, and say (on seeing her): "Yon's Blanche, look ye. What's she up ti noo?"—and be even disappointed in her if she were, at that moment, up to nothing in particular, as in one belying a reputa-

tion, and compensate itself with the expressed conviction: "Aye, but she'll be up ti summut before long, you may depend!"

Staid people like Fondie's aunt shook their heads over her in disapproval, and asked what her father was thinking of—as if that mattered to anybody—pointing back to the days of their own girlhood to prove how things had altered for the worse, as their mothers and their grandmothers in turn had done before them, so that if all these retrospective instances are to be believed, and could be traced to their source, it seems as though one must arrive ultimately at feminine perfection, or very nearly, by walking backward. Fondie's aunt—and others of her species—said *they* would never have been allowed to do what Blanche did, when they were Blanche's age. My word! They wouldn't have dared. And Blanche—when the rumor of these sayings reached her, by way of many mouths—only laughed and said, "More fool them," which saying, when it went back by the same route that the other saying had come, caused Fondie's aunt, and her persuasion, to comment: "That's nice talk from parson's daughter. My wod! Much good going ti choch diz *her*. We s'll mebbe see who's fool an' all, before long."

Whilst Blanche's mother was still alive, though spending most of her time on the sofa, with the blinds drawn after mid-day, Blanche went to school in Hunmouth, or was supposed to be going next term when her mother could spare her, and was able to meet with a suitable servant. But as suitable servants were bad to meet with in Whivle, and had a habit of running home after the first month, and saying they wouldn't stand it if it was ever so; and as Blanche's mother could spare her less and less, having to be helped upstairs and down again, and sometimes lay in bed all morning if there were nobody to assist her out of it; and as the school in Hunmouth was an obscure private school in a street intersected by the railway line, whose chief educational assets were a large unfurnished and uncarpeted room, some smoky muslin curtains, a wall map, a high piano

whose discolored keys, when struck, elicited a far-off attenuated response like a note sounded in eternity, appearing to have no establishable relation with this world; and as a pair of scholastic glasses that the principal wore on the bridge of her nose imparted a reed-like and authoritative precision to her voice and enabled her to refer to schoolbooks with a profound air of understanding—Blanche's education was both intermittent and meager. Not that Blanche minded about that.

Had the school been a public school, with fees payable strictly in advance, and no rebates for absence—and not a struggling private school that offered every facility short of education to its constituents, Blanche might have gone to Hunmouth regularly and learned a great deal more. Or she might have stopped altogether at home, and learned a great deal less. But even during these irregular periods of attendance, when Blanche journeyed up to Hunmouth by train each day, taking her books, her slippers, and her lunch with her in a satchel, and journeyed home each evening, she made her mark along the line. Hers was the most noticeable and familiar head that thrust itself out of the carriage window at every station, and there was not a porter or any official short of a stationmaster who had not felt her satchel about his ears at one time or other as the train went by. For if any dared Blanche to do a thing they would have feared to do themselves, Blanche did it at once, with the declaration: "I don't care. I aren't frightened if you think I am." That was her invariable formula for undertakings demanding courage, and it is on record that once she hit every porter over the head, with her satchel, in succession, between Whivvle and Hunmouth, except the last, who caught hold of the strap, so that Blanche had rapidly to decide between coming out upon the platform feet hindmost, or going on to school without her books, her lunch, and her slippers—ultimately choosing the latter alternative. Not that she had any special partiality for school, but that she loved the railway ride. At each station Blanche's face was to be seen, and Blanche's brown

canvas satchel waving out of the window, and Blanche's voice was to be heard assuring colleagues in other compartments and on the platform that there was room—for all a score of faces tried to squeeze out of the window above her own, as hot and noisy as could be, ready to insult officials and the public at large once the train was in motion. I wish I had a sovereign for every time that Blanche rode in the hat-rack in defiance of the notice that this was provided for light luggage only. In those days, when Blanche's smile was young, and life seemed all compounded of sunlight and laughter and the most glorious disregard of law and venerated things, if ever you traveled on the Merensea-Hunmouth line in a third-class carriage with the rack-net torn, as though a boot-heel had been thrust through it, and with initials scribbled on the ceiling, and public notices indecorously amended—so that passengers were requested by the Company to spit in this compartment, and to pull the alarm cord, and do equally reprehensible things—and the window straps had been removed—then you might note the number of the compartment with complacency, and know that Blanche had been there, and that Blanche's feet had trodden all over the cushions on which you sat, and Blanche's bold and shapely legs had dangled from the hat-rack, and Blanche's hand had probably drawn on the paintwork the fatty-degenerated heart containing the particular initials that had a special significance for Blanche at that time.

When Blanche's mother died, Blanche left the Hunmouth school for another term, in order to take care of her bereaved father and the house until things should settle down after their great sorrow, and the Vicar should find the suitable servant they had been looking for all the years when her poor mother was alive. But as the next term drew near and the principal with the nose-constricted voice wrote to tell Blanche's father that she would be happy to reserve a place for his daughter in accordance with the understanding, the Vicar said, "What understanding?" and instantly became bereaved again, and

spilled more gravy-spots on his waistcoat—most of these many spots being posterior to his wife's death—and it was accordingly decided that Blanche should remain at home for another term in order that she might devote more time to her music.

Why music, of all exacting, onerous, unprofitable, and hopeless studies, ever came to be associated with Blanche, heaven only knows. For Blanche told everybody in Whivvle that she hated it, and wasn't going to practice for anybody; and indeed only played the pianoforte under compulsion, with the loud pedal down and the most resolute wrists, as if she were smacking a baby. To rattle through a couple of scales and the Gipsy Rondo before dinner seemed to Blanche like the fulfilment of every requirement that could possibly be expected of her. But musical instruction was what the Vicar—for reasons best known to himself and the Almighty—appeared to covet for Blanche, pointing out to his daughter in their solemn conflicts that she would not have the advantage of an earthly father forever, and that at any time the Lord decreed things might sadly change, and that it behooved Blanche to be ready—as though music were any preparation for a contingency of the kind. Still, musical instruction was to be had in Hunmouth cheap, and in its most pernicious form, and it suited Blanche to go once every week or fortnight for her pianoforte lesson, carrying her dog-eared music-case, with a spare scented handkerchief in it, and to look all round the Hunmouth shops and study the stockings and corsets and underwear, and the hats, and then buy something as like these admired models as she could, much cheaper; and observe the latest Hunmouth way of swinging petticoats, and making Masonic eye-signs with which to enlarge the circle of desirable friends; and bring these acquisitions back to Whivvle and give Whivvle something to talk about.

XIV

FROM the very first Blanche cared infinitely more for boys than girls, and her splendid smile, and those provocative blue eyes dancing perpetually like stars in December, and the reckless shake of her tawny golden hair, brought her an endless succession of admirers from every quarter.

When any strange youth cycled hesitatingly through Whivvle, looking inquiringly from side to side like a strayed calf, you might be certain he was come to seek Blanche. If he rode twice through the High Street, cycling no faster, and looking as lost as before, you might be sure of it. And if he were to be seen later, riding briskly away with a tumbled flower in his button-hole, you would know his visit had not been in vain. Most likely the flower would be the one Blanche had brought back with her in her belt from the last music lesson; she always carried flowers in her belt ready for contingencies—weather-beaten flowers, as a rule, looking as if they had been in the wars, and had seen an engagement or two: old campaigners that had been given by somebody to somebody else, and by somebody else in turn to Blanche, and bestowed by Blanche upon the first buttonhole that caught her fancy. In the country, where money is scarce, flowers form a great currency of the affections. Every ploughboy, wagoner, and third year's lad carries a nosegay at his cycle-head on Sunday, or a bloom pinned to his coat collar for the lasses to beg or snatch at, and Blanche never saw a flower in anybody's coat but it became hers, either by skill, force, or supplication, and it went into her belt where other petalled trophies hung already in various stages of decline, like scalps. Not a few flaunted flowers in their buttonholes merely in the hope of being asked by Blanche for them, defending them with a hand against the importunities of all other supplicants, and saying: "Nay, I can't spare this yan. I'll bring ye another, some day, nobbut I can think on." But it was not

often that a flower changed hands again, however battered it might be, after it had once been consecrated in the bestowal by Blanche, and to this day there must be hundreds of dried and flattened petals between the pages of torn French exercise books, and Euclids, and Grammars, and pulpy school Testaments, looking as if—swung at the end of a three-foot strap—they had come in contact with a head or two in their time; all plucked from tokens bequeathed by Blanche and put away in commemoration of the giver. Poppies from the corn, or daisies from the stackyard, toadmint from the hedge, wild roses, or buttercups, were all one to Blanche with her finer flowers, and she was just as impartial in regard to her sweethearts. She plucked them from every quarter of her father's parish and beyond, without ever asking whether they were Churchgoers or Non-conformists. Hunmouth Fair generally provided her with a couple, and she never drove to Merensea in the vicarage tub called a buggy, behind the vicarage water-butt called by courtesy a pony, along with her brother and a basket of sandwiches, to spend the half-day, but that some new face was sure to pass inquiringly through Whivvle after awhile, or a picture post card in some unfamiliar hand came to the vicarage for Blanche.

All the district anniversaries, too, Blanche attended for the kissing. The Kissing Ring doubled its circumference when she joined it, and shrank to half its size when Blanche took leave. And since she could not have indulged in a tithe of these delectable practices without a confidante and companion, she made a friend of the carrier's daughter—who sang in the choir—and the two were inseparable on all occasions when the company of each was necessary to explain the actions of the other, so that Blanche could tell her father in an injured voice—if interrogated—that she had only been with Ada; and Ada could tell her parents she had been "setting Blanche a bit ways home" when they said: "What time diz thoo call this?"

Many a rendezvous Blanche gave in the vestry, where her father's faded cassock and torn surplice hung, and it was rare

she went to meet anybody she particularly cared for—though there seemed always somebody for whom she cared better—without the belfry key in her pocket, so that if it were too hot to go anywhere or do anything she could suggest the belfry, where one might be cool and undisturbed in the semi-darkness, amid the dust and cobwebs and jackdaws' débris, blown on by the breezes that sighed through the worm-eaten louvers, and look down upon a diminutive Whivvle, red-tiled and green-sheltered, and laugh to see Fondie bicycling along the arid roadway with his work-bass on his back; or her own father, plodding round the parish with a last week's handkerchief in his hand, ready to blow his nose upon it in despair of ever making anything of his daughter Blanche.

Blanche loved the belfry and the leads above it better than all the rest of the church put together, and if any campanologist or belfry-pilgrim of the future notes with astonishment in his pocket-book the profusion of B.B.'s scribbled on the rotten beams and cross-trees and on the bells themselves, in conjunction with other, more variable, letters, he need ascribe these to no Founder, Sponsor, or Prelate, but to Blanche herself, and sigh—if he has any humanity left in him—to think he has been born too late to write his own initials in a heart along with those he looks at, after being led up the dustiest and darkest and steepest ladders behind the finest pair of legs in all Whivvle, that had no fear of dust or dark or steepness, nor shirked precedence, but led the way without a tremor, saying they didn't care, and they weren't frightened.

As many as two brand-new admirers together would turn up at the church on a Sunday morning during worship, and press their foreheads against the diamond window-panes, independently of each other, to see if Blanche really were the Vicar's daughter and lived where she said she did, having verified which they would wait for her at the church gate and Blanche would be the first to come out after Benediction and walk off nonchalantly between them, while Whivvle asked, "Who's

yon?" Occasionally they took a seat by the door, where, fortified by Blanche's assiduous smile, they braved the rigors of a service that was not seldom characterized by the most irreverent and disgraceful behavior.

Blanche's lawless younger brother filled his mouth with gray peas and stimulated worship through a twelve-inch blowpipe; or shot flies and ear-tips with paper missiles from a catapult affixed to the thumb and finger of his left hand, that also served as a musical instrument, and could be made to take part in the hymns—with a sound resembling an extra large-sized blue-bottle after undergoing a course of vocal instruction. On a Monday morning in the height of the fly-shooting season the church floor would be strewn with V-shaped pellets, as though there had been a wedding, and it was rare one or two did not shake out of somebody's bonnet with a "Look ye! Did ever!" when the bonnet came to be brushed and wrapped away in a kerchief for next Sunday.

And Blanche's elder brother folded cigarettes during the Litany—manufacturing a sufficient supply to last him all day—and pared his nails for the coming week, and read the "Confessions of a Lady's Maid," and the "Revelations of an Escaped Nun," and "Secrets of Matrimony," with his head down as if he had a stroke, whilst his father preached from Samuel and Kings.

XV

AND Blanche had no more sense of devotion than a rose has of morals.

The fact that her own father was the Vicar, and that all her life she had lived under the same roof with the Thirty-nine Articles at close quarters, stood sadly in the way of her salvation. She knew what sort of imperfect socks and darned pants the Thirty-nine Articles were wearing when they said "My Brethren," and where the darns occurred; and how

many handkerchiefs the Thirty-nine Articles had, with the approximate quantity available for active service; and what a silly fool the Thirty-nine Articles were, or was; and how unreasonably wroth the Thirty-nine Articles would be tomorrow when Blanche slipped away on the quiet with the pony and trap to Merensea, and came home to say she thought the Thirty-nine Articles knew she was going. Didn't they hear her tell them?

That rebellious smile of hers, with its curious commixture of friendship and defiance, was never meant for the service of any solemn-faced and sober-minded deity. The Creator that conceived and executed Blanche, and equipped her with that amphitheater of teeth and those scintillating eyes, must have been a tyro at his trade if he really expected sobriety and worship of them; or else a jocund God of Mirth, who loved laughter and human happiness.

Even when Blanche sang the whole verse of a hymn in her solemnest mood, without once looking round or shifting her blue eyes from the book, her teeth seemed to be laughing all the while at irresistible humor in the text; and when she knelt to pray you could see them—if you turned your head—gleaming through her spread fingers like pearls, though much whiter. The only time they seemed to close during the service—and then only transitorily—was when Blanche sucked humbugs during her father's sermon; big four-a-penny humbugs worthy of her, as big as a baby's fist, and even stickier, that she transferred from one cheek to another with obvious difficulty. For which offense her father had rebuked her more than once before the face of the whole congregation, and would not continue his preaching until Blanche had visibly ejected the offending sweetmeat into her handkerchief, carefully wrapping it up for further study on some more auspicious occasion.

Once, indeed, he preached a sermon on the text: "My daughter hath a devil," and everybody except Fondie said it meant Blanche. Blanche said she didn't care how many devils

she had, and if what Blanche had was really a devil after all, it is a pity there are not more devils in these days to go round, for they improve some people wonderfully, and Fondie would have been all the better for one—as Blanche in substance told him. The Vicar had even threatened Blanche that unless her behavior improved he would not allow her in church, but Blanche promptly said: "I don't care. I'd rather stop at home," and the Vicar only resorted to this measure in emergency; nor did he accept Blanche's challenge to rebuke her elder brother for making cigarettes and reading light literature below the level of the pew ledge. "He's as bad as me," Blanche told her father, and not without justice. "But you never say anything to him. You dursn't. You're frightened of him. You're always on to me."

And though her father stamped down these impious words with a stentorian "Blanche! You shan't speak to me like that. I won't allow it!" Blanche was very probably right, for her elder brother, being now in a position to buy his own ties and cigarettes, had arrived at that stage of independence that does not brook parental control. Nor did her younger brother submit to much more, for if the Vicar attempted recourse to Solomon's formula for the correction of sons—in which Fondie was so firm a believer—he would put himself into a fighting posture at once, with the contested portion of his anatomy towards the wall, and bid his father, "Lave may bay!"—which is Anglo-Saxon for "Let me alone." After a futile and undignified scuffle in which the Vicar got as much as he gave, or rather more, he would lock this unregenerate son in the room where the engagement had taken place (leaving him at liberty to escape by the window) and would go off to visit his parishioners in a spirit of melancholy despair and submission to the Lord's will, consoling himself before all and sundry with the reflection that he had done his duty and could do no more, and some day perhaps his family would realize the fact when it was too late. And perhaps (he also reflected) if his family had brought more

happiness into his heart he might have lost sight of the true and only Source of happiness, and forgotten the One that never fails. Yes, yes. He blew his nose in a melancholy minor key. The Almighty had his own way of reaching our hearts and teaching us through sorrow those lessons that gladness could never learn. Who knows but his family was sent to try him, to prove his faith, and prepare him for the Courts Above?

But the Vicar's life passed as a succession of torpors alternating with outbursts of brief and dictatorial piety. Once in every while he woke up to the voice of an accusing conscience, and in a state of blustering rectitude and resolution would perceive all the things to which he had been blind. He would perceive by the lightning-flashes of self-accusing wrath, the brummagem bangles on Blanche's wrist, and the brummagem brooches that rose and fell on her resentful bosom when the parental finger pointed at them; and the one and elevenpence ha'penny open-work stockings that Blanche had coveted during the space of three music lessons in Hunmouth, and then bought out of her own money with the aid of a trifling loan from the carrier's daughter. All these signs and tokens of a household sliding irrevocably to ruin, that he had seen with unseeing eyes during these latter weeks, and accepted by an indolent faith as part of his normal and natural environment, flashed out upon his awakened righteousness as encroaching snares of the devil, things to be eradicated and stamped down and resisted with all the force of his voice and the whole armor of God. And in a twinkling the beacons of spiritual warfare would be ablaze. Blanche's jewelry would be impounded, and the Hunmouth stockings condemned as things immodest and unsuitable, to be taken off at once and never, under any circumstances, to be worn again. And Blanche would be forbidden to make a friend of the carrier's daughter, from whom she was supposed by the parental indignation to have acquired all these vicious habits since her mother's time.

And the awakened eye would see the hopeless disjunction of

all the family life; the wicked irregularity of their meals; the irreligious disorder of their domestic habits. They breakfasted too late. They went to bed at scandalous hours. They lacked all sense of punctuality, and discipline, and law. And an amended time-table would be drawn up for all the functions of the house—for meals and music, and goings-out and comings-in. Blanche must be at her pianoforte not a moment later than half-past nine each morning; and she must never leave the house after tea without the Vicar's knowledge and consent. Blanche, more than the others, stood accused of having shortened her poor mother's days—though this shocking responsibility was shifted to the shoulders of her brothers when occasion suited. "It is disgraceful!" the Vicar complained. "It is scandalous. How can we expect God's blessing?"—as though Blanche wanted it; blessings from any source being the last sort of gift that appealed to her. "The whole place will cry shame on us if we are not careful"—which latter was true in all but its final clause and its future tense. Grace at meals and family prayers would be resuscitated, and the family Bible searched for and laid conspicuously on the sideboard, and Blanche would be warned that the Sunday after next, without fail, she would have to take the service. Fondie would be notified to that effect, and renotified to the contrary half an hour afterwards by Blanche herself.

"He needn't think I'm going to play his old organ, because I aren't. I don't care. I aren't frightened of him."

And indeed, why should she be? For within three days of the titanic struggle for righteousness' sake, the Vicar would have sunk back into the beard of torpor once again, and breakfasts would all be sixes and sevens, and the Bible on the sideboard buried under a chaos of stockings to be darned and pants to be mended, and halfpenny evening papers that Blanche's brother brought back with him from Hunmouth, and all the variegated litter that was swept from the table to the sideboard before meals. And Blanche's elder brother would run to catch his

train, slamming the front door most blasphemously behind him because his boots had not been blacked and there was no bacon; and Blanche's younger brother would prowl into the pantry and fill his pockets with sultana raisins and residues of cake, and anything in the edible line that happened to be handy, and drink a cup of cold water from the pump in the kitchen, and secrete a box of matches and go away to school with yesterday's Plimsoll line round his neck. And the Vicar would come down to breakfast asking whether there were any clean handkerchiefs and collars ready for him yet, or holding a frayed collar in his hand because the shirt-button had come off. And Blanche would have to sew the latter on for him, saying it was sickening, and "Sit still."

And there would no grace said at the Vicar's meal-table and no prayers before breakfast and after supper; and no nightly hymn sung, as the Vicar had decided should be sung, and ought to be sung by right in all Christian houses that cherish any hope of a blessing—particularly in houses of the clergy of the Church of England with a parish to consider.

And the Vicar, weary of the unwonted labors of righteousness, as he would be after a day's hard work with the spade in the vegetable garden, went back to his hens and toolshed and the nutrition of the vicarage pig. And Blanche's elder brother bought more cigarettes and ties, and smoked in his bedroom in defiance of the recent proclamation that made this act illegal; and borrowed more books for Sunday—that Blanche used to procure by craft and peruse in her bedroom with the door locked, hastily turning over the pages in order to make sure of the wicked parts before the precious volume would be recaptured, which at any moment it was liable to be if her brother were in the house. Not that he had any principled scruples against Blanche's reading anything she liked, in a general way, but he did not care for her to acquire her knowledge of life's delectable mysteries from the same source as himself, or hold any clue to the nature of his curiosities and the constitution of his mind.

The moment, therefore, that he discovered any tampering with his literary coffers his footsteps were heard in noisy quest of Blanche, and his voice called upon her in tones peremptory and menacing. Blanche, still turning the pages of the abducted volume, heard the footsteps and the voice approach her door, upon which—after the obdurate knob had betrayed the fact of her whereabouts—began a peremptory bombardment.

"Blanche! Do you hear, Blanche?"

Dissimulation being impossible, and intelligent reading out of the question, Blanche would raise a chill and discouraging voice to inquire:

"What do you want?"

"I want my book."

"Which book?"

"You know which book. The one you've sneaked out of my drawer."

"I haven't been near your drawer."

"That's a lie. Why have you locked your door?"

"Because I have," Blanche would retort. "It's my room. I shall lock it when I like."

"Give me my book."

Silence.

"Do you hear, Blanche? Open this door."

Silence.

"I know what you're doing. You're reading. I can hear you turning the pages."

Still silence.

Then Blanche's brother would have recourse to final measures, either bombarding the door with both fists, after an ultimatum that he meant to continue until Blanche capitulated, or threatening—if the door were not opened within so many counted minutes—to tell her father. But this last threat was of less avail, for Blanche knew as well as her brother its manifest disadvantages, and would challenge him to "Do it!"

"I shall."

"Do it then."

"I say, I shall."

"I say, do it then." And when his further action proclaimed the failure of this line of attack, Blanche would taunt him. "Ah! You durstn't. Tell him, that's all. I aren't frightened, if you think I am."

Sometimes, indeed, her elder brother would retire with a singularly sinister and threatening voice.

"Oh, all right, Blanche. You'll see."

And Blanche, rapidly sifting the final pages through her fingers, would ask herself what article of incrimination or value belonging to her had been left vulnerable in other quarters of the house. The speculation was justified by long experience, and a comparatively trifling space of time would be vouchsafed for its solution before the bombardment would be renewed and the voice of Blanche's brother, after calling upon her for the last time to surrender, would declare with triumph:

"All right. I've got something of yours. Unless you open that door . . ."

Blanche, busy with guesses and apprehensions, would say in tones of scepticism and derision:

"You haven't got anything. You can't kid me."

"I have."

"I don't believe you. What is it? You durstn't say. No! Because you haven't."

But in one way or other the siege would come to an end, and Blanche would say: "Take your old book. Who wants it! There's nothing in it. Next time I'll give it to father."

And Blanche's younger brother, following the general relapse, made catapults as before—sometimes out of elastic pulled from Blanche's old garters when he knew she was wearing her better pair, though for preference out of the better pair itself because the elastic from this source had more spring and shot straighter. And to add insult to injury he shot Blanche in the face with them if she boxed his ears.

And Blanche went back to her jewelry, and put on the proscribed Hunmouth stockings for adult and scandalized Whivvle to point at and exclaim: "Look ye! See ye there! Did you ever! Vicar's daughter an' all!"—and say she would be doing better if she'd look a little more after her poor father and keep him tidier; or, conversely, ask what her father was thinking of to look so little after *her*.

XVI

THERE were two vicarages in Whivvle; the old vicarage and the new—"Two ower many," as Deacon Smeddy used to say darkly across the counter, with a hand at the back of him groping for the corner of his handkerchief, except to Blanche and Blanche's father at grocery time.

Why there were two vicarages instead of one, nobody in Whivvle rightly knew.

But whatever the cause of the duplication of vicarages may have been, the fact remains incontestable that John Ingram was the last vicar to die under the old roof, and that so long ago that no decipherable stone marks his place in the churchyard today, although there is a marble slab near the chancel, put up by extinct parishioners, enumerating more virtues than this busy age has time to read or credit, particularly in nineteenth-century Latin, with the adjectives in *issimus*—which seems to have been a characteristic of the defunct virtues of that period, and points an awful lesson to posterity, whose vices display a growing tendency to usurp this superlative termination. After this superlative man's death, as though sadly conscious that the age of virtuous superlatives was fast passing, the Nesastical Missionaries built a new vicarage more in conformity with the spirit of the age for the housing of his successors; giving it dormer windows, and a slate roof, and a bathroom over the kitchen with a real cast-iron and marble-painted bath—in

which the vicarage potatoes were said to be stored at one time. This was the vicarage Blanche lived in—though of course the potatoes were all consumed by then, and the inside of the bath had been enamelled a pale dairy blue, which Blanche's younger brother never really cared for. There was a paddock, too, for the vicarage pony to fatten in; and a pond at once corner of it, sunk deep within a horseshoe of trees, fringed with sedges, that looked quite green and picturesque, and bred shimmering dragon-flies, and had a stagnant smell in hot weather.

Blanche rather liked the smell and situation, and used to take her Penny Storyettes there in the summer, lying all her length on the grass, kicking her legs every time the gnats bit them, and reading about Gerald and Gwendolynes and lost heirs and baronets in disguise, until somebody whistled from the bridle-road two fields off, or rang a bicycle bell, whereat she would jump to her feet in a moment, twisting Gerald and Gwendolyn and the disguised baronet into a tube for waving high above her head, and would swing off to join the whistle or bicycle bell as the case might be. By the time she came home again Gerald and Gwendolyn would have been so much twisted and untwisted, and so much used for hitting people and slashing nettles, that this particular page of them would be twice as dark as any other, and frayed almost illegible—even in the strongest sunlight—for all who had not read the story before.

Later, when her father had forbidden Penny Storyettes the house, and even consigned borrowed copies to the flame—much to Blanche's indignation—on no more justifiable ground than that he had threatened to do so, Blanche transferred her allegiance to the Sunday Sacred Pennyworth—published by the same illustrious firm, and written by the same illustrious authoresses—which was merely Penny Storyettes with the addition of a text for the day and thought for the week, and silenced her father's objections without sacrificing a single murder or breathless situation, whilst the advertisements were even more ab-

sorbing than the literary matter and contributed liberally to Blanche's education.

All round this new vicarage, too, the Nesastical Missionaries set a privet hedge, meet for vicarial seclusion, never thinking that seclusion was the last thing Blanche sighed for, and that she would much rather have had a house on the main street where she could have signalled to her friends as they passed by. Fondie's father, and Dod's father as well, and many more in Whivvle whose running days were over, remembered when the hedge used to be cropped as close as Fondie's hair at the month end, and was so thick and green in summer that one could not see through it—just at the very season of the year when people were likely to pass by—for all one might hear somebody clipping steadily away at the privet on the garden side, and know it was the parson in his flannel shirt-sleeves, as could be proved by his voice if only you bade him good day. This was the antepenultimate vicar, before Blanche's father read himself into the parish, and did the Whivvle baptisms and burials. After that, the clipping of the hedge lapsed into the rheumatically hands of Isaac Marfitt, who had two days a year allowed for the purpose, but the hedge grew higher than his crippled arms could cope with, despite the most horrible faces, and ran up ten feet or more in parts, with gaps big enough for Blanche's brother to creep through, after being strictly forbidden; and even Blanche could make use of them in an emergency, slipping out when her father was coming in, or in when he was coming out, for the avoidance of profitless altercation; and the vicarage poultry clucked in the privet roots, and dug dust-pits in dry weather, and scratched their discarded feathers over the vicarage lawn.

XVII

AS for the old vicarage, it was converted into a mere abode for the laity, and never quite reconciled itself to the change. At our time it was inhabited by a gentleman dog-fancier, who kept all Whivvle awake at nights with his kennel of yelping pups; himself relying on intoxicants for slumber. Then the house passed into other hands that built an eight-foot wall all round it, or rather completed the eight-foot wall that had been extant in the Vicar's time, and made the summit impregnable with broken glass embedded in cement. The glass came from the bottles that the dog-fancier left behind him, and there were sufficient bottles beside, it is averred, to have garnished a second wall as big as the first. Finally, after one or two brief and undistinguished tenancies, the house stood empty again, with a chain and padlock on the front gates, and a board saying where the keys were to be had—that Blanche's younger brother and his colleagues never rested until they had uprooted and pitched into the shrubbery, where it lay amid other and unnameable things. Everybody that had rubbish to dispose of flung it over the old vicarage wall, that came to be the recognized tip for all Whivvle, and, if preserved, would have furnished investigators of years to come with a wonderful knowledge of the life of the period, touching the tinned goods Whivvle fed on; the liver salts it had recourse to; the hats and boots it wore; the wall-papers it affected; the lamp-glasses and coal-scuttles that were in vogue, together with crocks and kettles and a thousand other things too numerous to mention.

For by this time the ancient formidability of the glass-fortified wall was gone. Time and other agencies, some of them human, had made inroads into the rows of sharp and threatening teeth, and there were half a dozen places or more where the agile and the lawless might elude the wall's dentition, and

did. Smoke rising from the old vicarage chimneys on wet afternoons showed where Blanche's brigand brother and his myrmidons plotted round profane fires, and roused obscene echoes in the once sanctified house where the last vicar had breathed out his virtues in *issimus*. And Blanche's substantial shoes contributed to the footholds kicked and carved in the loosening brickwork of the outer walls, spurred on by visions of green apples or unripe pears, or any other of the desirable fruits that struggled in the weed-grown garden after a hopeless maturity; or by the effectual taunt that she dared't.

From time to time prospective tenants would come by train or other vehicle to view the property, and old Isaac Marfitt, who had the keys and acted caretaker for the owners, would assume his most effective cough—the one that he had to stand still for, on both sticks, while it racked him from the stomach upward; and that ought to have elicited a shilling of any right minded person's money, though such were few—and after the prospective tenants had gazed all through the house and grounds, bawling questions into the trumpet that Isaac made with alternate hands to alternate ears, and being told in return how damp the house was, and how bad for the rheumatics, and how steep the stairs were for a man close on eighty that had worked hard in his time—they went their way, and nothing further seemed to happen.

Rumor, it is true—misled in thoughtless moments by the smoke that Blanche's younger brother and his colleagues caused to issue violently from the chimneys, and by the sound of hammering when they made internal alterations to bring the house more in accordance with brigand requirements—let the old vicarage no end of times, but Isaac Marfitt on behalf of the owners never did, and the customary formula for greeting in the vicinity of the padlocked gate was:

"Aud 'oose keeps empty."

With the traditional antiphon:

"Aye! She's in a baddish spot."

To which the first speaker, if of a talkative disposition, might—without stopping—subscribe an asquiescent:

"She's not in a very good 'un."

Whivvle came ultimately to embrace the belief that the house would never let at all—the time having gone by for it—but that, in the inevitable course of things, she would be burned to the ground. And, whenever the thread of smoke linked her chimneys with the sky, read doom in the portent, and declared:

"Aye! They'll be doin' it yance too oftens. Aud 'oose'll be gone yan o' these fine mornings."

XVIII

ONE day Rumor ran the round of Whivvle again, very much out of breath, saying:

"Aud 'oose is let!"

"Noo thoo needn't bring that tale to me!" retorted Whivvle. "For I wean't believe it. Thoo's brought it ower many times before. . . . Who's she let to?"

Rumor said apologetically that she didn't rightlins know, not having been telt. To which Whivvle made rejoinder:

"No, nor nobody else."

"It'll be same folk she's been let to these last couple o' years," said Whivvle sarcastically, and was inclined to be emphatic and sceptical until Rumor thought to mention that Fondie's head had been seen above the roof that morning, and he was writing off to the Beeminster lawyers by the night's post with an estimate for doing as little to the exterior paintwork as possible at the lowest cost; whereupon Whivvle grew less contradictory towards Rumor, though without positively capitulating, saying that folk said syke things nowadays, and it wasn't well to believe anything one was telt.

But Whivvle grew more credulous when, a week later, Fondie was reported to be at work upon the spouting with a can of

Irish paint and two ladders, having received orders to complete the work as expeditiously as possible, though he could impart no authentic information to the curious as to who the new tenants were; regretting with his wonted and exasperating humility that he could say no more, and referring inquirers to Isaac Marfitt who was no better informed than Fondie—though a great deal deaf, and was only able to communicate with certainty that his rheumatism had been very painful these last few days, and it was maybe what a man might expect when he came to be nearly eighty, having worked hard all his life. To which Whivvle was barely able to offer a civil sympathy, asking: "Lawks! Is thoo only man wi' rheumatics. Thoo wants ti ev my shoulder, an' then thoo'll know." A statement from which Isaac's deafness spared him, for, on cupping his ear with his knotted hand and offering it in this more insulated state to Whivvle's sympathy, Whivvle merely cried: "Where's missus?" Not that Isaac's wife had much to tell except that she had been ordered to char the house inside, and clean away all the brigandage that Blanche's brother and his myrmidons had collected in it. Later on one of the owners drove from Beeminster in person, and went over the house with Fondie, sanctioning the repapering of this room, and the repairing of that, and giving orders for the removal of the rubbish from the shrubbery, which had accumulated almost to the height of the wall in places. And when the owner was gone again and Whivvle came to Fondie to inquire who the new tenant was, Fondie said with confusion that "Subject had come into his head a time or two, but he'd lacked courage ti ask."

Even his father—though in general professing contempt of all district tattle—shared the public curiosity and voiced the public resentment at Fondie's diffidence, saying:

"Why! Thoo's ower fond ti ask owt. Thoo'll be ower fond ti ask for thy meat next, an' ower fond ti chew it when thoo gets it gien."

And Blanche told Fondie he was a silly fool, for she was

desperately anxious to know as soon as possible if there were any prospective sweethearts for her among the newcomers, and whether it would be worth while to put on the Hunmouth stockings, and beg some blossom from somebody for her belt, and reconnoiter the old house with a Sunday Sacred screwed up in her hand, the moment it came to be occupied; confiding to her friend the carrier's daughter that she hoped the family would be boys.

All this took place in June, when the new tenants arrived.

Three cartloads of Whivvle rubbish had been led out of the shrubbery. Only in a few places did the flies still stick to the outer paint, and the paper was as good as dry in the rooms in which Fondie had hung it.

The pantehnicon spent one night on a railway truck in the Whivvle siding, and some went to see it, saying there was nothing to see when they came back, though Dod affirmed it looked like the roundabouts packed up in readiness for Hunmouth Fair, whereat Dod's sister exclaimed: "Hunmouth Fair!" in a voice of contempt for Dod's folly. "Hunmouth Fair isn't o' three month yet." Nevertheless she took the opportunity to remind her father that he had promised to take her to Hunmouth Fair some day, and her father said, with refreshing acquiescence, "Aye, some day I will," though when she pressed to know when "some day" was likely to be, his voice grew vaguer, and he said, "We'll see." "You said you'd see last year," Dod's sister complained. "But you never do. You're allus going ti see. Will you promise ti see this time?" And Dod's father said, "Aye, we'll see," in a tone of such cheerfulness that anybody but his daughter might have believed that the voice held hope, "we'll see" having been the equivalent for Hunmouth Fair and all other keenly desired things for as far back as her active memory could serve.

Next morning two workmen came from the place Dod's sister so desired to go to when the time arrived for seeing.

The first train brought them. They unrolled two aprons out of two baskets when they had knocked the ashes from their pipes upon the station palings, and donned the aprons and tied the tapes in the leisurely fashion of beings with all eternity before them, looking about the country and commenting on its general flatness. And two of George Piccroft's horses were yoked to the pantehnicon and drew it to the old house, with the two workmen seated on the tailboard that swung suspended by two chains like a drawbridge from the back, their legs dangling in unison to the oscillations of the van, staring at the rearward view of Whivvle through the wisps of tobacco smoke that issued from their lips and hung behind them. On each side of the old house gates a line of expectant eye-witnesses was drawn up to watch the van pass through. No hearse could have been more attentively received. Silence fell over the spectators as the pantehnicon made the curve, with George Piccroft leaning out from the off horse to keep an eye upon the wheel and gate-post. The van lumbered through the open gates like a cow squeezing its flanks through a byre door, and crunched up the drive, whilst George Piccroft ducked his head to the branches of laburnum and beech that tried to push him off his horse, and scraped both sides of the tarpaulin-covered van in passing. The workmen dismounted from their drawbridge, knocking out the hot ashes of their pipes once more, and not a few of the spectators who had time, and all who hadn't, drawn in by the irresistible backwash of the great vehicle, followed its crunching to the front door, to see what sort of furniture the leviathan held in its vast belly, and take a peep into the old house whilst the door stood open.

In the course of an hour or so, after the workmen had had time to roll up their shirt-sleeves as far as the elbow, and the second train from Hunmouth had been heard to puff into Whivvle and snort its way out again, Bob Machin's spring-cart drove suddenly through the open gates and charged the onlookers in the rear. The attack was so unexpected—for Whivvle had

almost lost thought of the new tenants in its concentration upon straw-filled crates and canvas-swathed furniture—that some of the hindmost never even suspected the spring-cart had come through the gates at all until Bob Machin cried “Whoa!” and the mare snorted down the backs of their necks, and shook her headgear; and there was so much clutching after hands, and pulling at petticoats, and My Goodnessing—as though Bob Machin’s mare had been a locomotive—that the newcomers might almost have escaped observation had not one of them been a tall and aged gentleman, notably stiff about the limbs, who dismounted from the trap with deliberation and difficulty, albeit he disdained assistance from his companion, and asked Bob twice in an authoritative and audible voice what there was to pay—which allowed Bob Machin to answer, “Two shillings, sir,” on the second occasion, having had misgivings that eighteenpence was all too little to ask the gentry, when he said it the first time; that being the usual charge for everybody except Whivvle—in which case it was by arrangement. And even on the second occasion, though Bob Machin voiced the price as audibly as he could, and some of the spectators repeated the figure for the old gentleman’s comprehension in tones more respectful than distinct, the old gentleman said “Eh?” as though he had not been answered, and did not grasp the sum demanded of him until it had been made the subject of a chorus. At first he seemed disposed to pay Bob Machin publicly, then and there, and Whivvle was already attentive to see which pocket he would bring his money from, and whether it would be produced loose or carried in a purse, when, as though become aware of this backing of extraneous spectators for the first time, he turned a cold and inquiring eye upon them—an eye filled with surprise and interrogative displeasure—and bade Bob Machin follow him with the portmanteaux to the house, into which he stepped accompanied by a shy and slender-looking boy, whose gaze had been wandering with abstracted curiosity over his new surroundings during the interview.

With that the two of them passed from sight, and Whivvle—uneasy lest it might be called upon a second time to sustain the scrutiny of that chill rebukeful orb—bethought itself of work awaiting it at home, and shook its infancy by the shoulders, crying: “My wod! What are you doin’ here?” and “Don’t let me ’ave ti look for thee onny more!” and “Be off wi’ ye this moment!” and “The idea! Comin’ up drive as though place belonged ye!” and dismissed its infancy in front of it, by a succession of pushes and threatening manual gestures, asking “What will gentleman think o’ ye?” in loud voices of outraged rectitude designed to explain and justify its own presence and propitiate the eye; but the eye was too preoccupied to attend, and the ear was certainly deaf.

The two workmen went their way toward nightfall with their aprons in their baskets and their pipes in their mouths; and as there was an hour to spare before the Hunmouth train went out, they spent it at the White Cow. One of them showed so genial in company that it was odds he had an unhappy wife at home. Of the new tenants they were able to impart little, save that they had come all the way out of Kent, and the old gentleman seemed a Crusty Piece. The last verse of the final song had to be decapitated, and the singer and his companion took leave of the White Cow in a hurry—the betting being even that they would have to come back. But they didn’t, and as Jarge Amery remarked, it was a pity they had to go at all, for folk mud ’a larned something, and syke bonny fellows as yon didn’t come to Whivvle every day.

XXI

WITH the workmen’s departure a great silence settled over the old house.

Whivvle awaited developments, but developments were slow, and it had to depend largely on Rumor again, and

Isaac Marfitt's wife, for its intelligence—Isaac Marfitt's wife having been engaged by the old gentleman to take domestic charge of the house (while Isaac made shift for himself at home) until somebody more permanent should succeed her. Whivvle asked: "What! Is there no sarvints comin'?" and Isaac's wife could only answer: "Noo I know ni more than thee."

As to what had brought them, or why they had chosen Whivvle for their home, Isaac's wife knew no more than anybody else, and had not dared to make the least inquiry of the Eye, which like the true gentleman's orb it was, seemed to forbid all interrogation. But it came back upon Isaac, in the course of ample retrospection at home, that he had shown such an eye over the old house last back end, and from other quarters too there came corroboration that the eye had been noticed one day in the district about the time that Isaac spoke of.

And it was not an eye one could lightly forget, by the account Isaac's wife gave of it. It was a cold gray eye, cold as a chisel, that went right through one's head, and, coming out at the back, seemed fixed on things beyond and had to be reminded respectfully twice as to the topic of immediate discussion before it was withdrawn, and even then only after its owner had passed his somewhat trembling hand across it. For a whole week the inmates of the old house were never encountered outside its gate, although there was a report—which some believed—that they had been seen along the roadway at nightfall. Jarge Amery swore he passed them on the Mersham Road and said good night, and the old gentleman lifted his head and the boy answered—but that was nothing to go by, for Jarge Amery was always swearing. During this time Blanche never caught a vestige of the delicate and overgrown boy, though she tried her best. She went to Fondie as a last resource, and asked Fondie what he was like, but Fondie, with a look of humble sadness, had to confess he had not seen him, and Blanche said it was sickening.

"You never see anything, Fondie, just when anybody wants you to."

Fondie admitted the impeachment.

"Why, I misdoot I don't see a deal, Miss Blanche," he said, "as you very rightly remark. I'se jealous there's a many things I don't observe that mud be ti my advantage nobbut I discarned 'em better. My feythur says same."

On Sunday Whivle held itself expectant to see the newcomers at church, and Blanche looked forward to the morning service with more interest in things divine than she had shown for long enough. Almost the first thing she did after tea on Saturday was to wash the Hunmouth openwork stockings and hang them before the kitchen fire to dry, so that their wear might be resumed on the morrow without interruption. And she trimmed up her hat and begged some double pink pyrethrums for her belt, and bought a bag of silver-coated cachoux instead of mammoth humbugs for the sermon, so that her breath might smell very fashionable and attractive if she had occasion to cough in church, or speak to anybody after the service—first impressions counting for so much; and was among the earliest in church, sitting where she could command an uninterrupted view of the porch and the flagged pathway through the graves and long grass to the gate beyond. But nobody came, except somebody sickening, who had been the week before, and Blanche was not in the least effusive to see him, and shook his attentions off almost with a word when he asked which way she was walking home, saying she wasn't walking home any way, and her father as close behind, and somebody mustn't be seen speaking to her now, or she would get into a frightful row, and her brothers were watching them, and she couldn't stop . . .

. . . And so left somebody all by himself behind her for the worshippers to stare at as they issued, with nothing in the world to do but make a feeble pretext of reading epitaphs, whilst Blanche went away in quite a bad temper, wishing she had

bought humbugs after all and chanced it. She had no hope that the newcomers would make their first appearance in the evening, though she went to church prepared for the eventuality—taking all the silver-plated cachoux that she could recapture—cachoux forming admirable ammunition for watch-spring guns, as Blanche's brother was aware.

But the newcomers proved indifferent to her preparations, and it was Farmer Warkup's second son, with the light blue eyes and flaxen eyelashes, that ultimately set her home by the long way. Fondie might have done it if only Fondie had had a little more dash, for Blanche was in that disgusted frame of mind that does not stick at trifles, and she would have walked home with anybody just to let the absentee see she didn't care and could do very well without him. And, after all, Fondie had very nice brown eyes—if he had only known how to use them. And a very nice smile—if he hadn't seemed as much in awe of it as he was of his own father. And if he hadn't been possessed of a hopeless deference that deferred to everybody and had no spirit of its own. Fondie would no more have dared to ask Blanche which way she was walking home—except in the purest spirit of polite inquiry—than he would have dared to slap her father on the back, or hail him "Vicar." And though Blanche had given him the opportunity to wink at her and be brave, a hundred times or more in church (and out of it), he had never taken one of them, knowing her better (in his own mind) than to believe Miss Blanche would ever entertain such an idea, or wish him to forget himself and what was due to the Vicar's daughter.

Even when Blanche had taken hold of him by both arms—as she did on one occasion—and looked straight into his brown eyes, saying: "I don't believe you know how to wink, Fondie!" Fondie only smiled a brief apologetic smile and told her: "I'se jealous you do me ower much credit, Miss Blanche."

"Wink then," Blanche charged him. "Go on. Do it. You can't. I don't believe you know how."

"I wish I mud say i' truth I didn't, Miss Blanche," Fondie confessed, "but I misdoot there's a deal of things I know that I should be better for being ignorant on."

"What are they?" Blanche asked with a directitude that made Fondie Bassiemoor blink. "Go on. Tell me. I don't care. I aren't frightened. You dursn't, Fondie."

And, true enough, Fondie durstn't.

So Farmer Warkup's second son with the flaxen hair and eyelashes got the benefit of the cachoux, and the reversion of the pink pyrethrums, whilst Fondie walked respectfully to the vicarage gate with the reverend father, talking hymns and weather prospects in his Sabbath voice, and studying his toes as if they were texts, out of consideration for the day and the exalted company he walked in.

XXII

ON the Monday Blanche put on her Hunmouth stockings again, though the hole in the right foot which had first declared itself on Sunday made walking no pleasure. But Fashion must be served. Blanche said it should be mended tomorrow—which was her usual day for mending most things, as the Vicar and her brothers complained; Blanche's invariable rejoinder to such protestations being, "I aren't the servant."

That very morning, indeed, her elder brother had slammed the front door almost off its hinges because there were still no pearl buttons on his pet fancy shirt; and the Vicar was wearing winter pants because his second summer pair had disappeared mysteriously in the wash—Blanche having mislaid them as an alternative to repair; and Blanche's younger brother had secreted a white petticoat of Blanche's at the very top of the bathroom cupboard, where the fluff accumulated like rich fur, an inch thick or more, under the belief that Blanche would be

requiring the garment that day. This was an act of revenge for odd stockings which Blanche's reprehensible neglect caused him to have to wear. And there had been a godless scrimmage on the landing, and blows given and returned, and a violent drumming on the outer panels of Blanche's derisively defended door, and much bad blood and language, and as the Vicar despairingly inquired: How could they expect a blessing? How was God ever likely to prosper them with such dissensions in the family?

Whereat he awoke from the vicarial torpor once again, assumed the waived parental authority once more, and became wrathful and resonant with righteous resolution, saying he would not have it, and it must not be, and it should not be, and he meant to be obeyed. And Blanche's Hunmouth stockings had to come off before he would sit down to breakfast with her, or suffer grace. And he confiscated three bangles, and a beautiful medallion from the last Hunmouth Fair in colors—bearing the following stimulating inscription round its periphery:

“I AM OUT FOR A GOOD TIME. ARE YOU?”
—which Blanche had thought would be appropriate to wear on her breast this afternoon, in case she met anybody belonging to the old house. And he tore up a valuable illustrated edition of “Secrets of the Cloister,” which Blanche had abstracted from her elder brother's private drawer by a secret process of her own; and the Vicar in his zealous haste would have totally destroyed the current Grand Special Illustrated Bathing Summer Number of *Tricky Topics* (2d., or post free to any part of the British Isles, 2½d.) if Blanche had not snatched it from him in time with the declaration that it was the *Sunday Sacred*, and belonged to Fondie Bassiemoor; truth constituting no essential part of Blanche's code of honor, as her father not infrequently deplored, asking:

“How am I to believe you?”

To which Blanche's wayward answer was:

"Who wants you to believe me? You needn't unless you like. I don't care."

After which demonstrations of authority the Vicar ordered Blanche to her pianoforte, himself washing up the breakfast things, and warning her that on Sunday next without fail he should expect her to take her proper part in the musical service. Furthermore, as a practical acknowledgment of parochial responsibility, Blanche must accompany him this afternoon in a call upon the newcomers, it being high time (said he) that she assumed her mother's place in the work of the parish and lent her attention to serious things.

Duly in the course of the afternoon, therefore, when the Vicar after long search had found and furbished up by means of bread-crumbs an antiquated visiting card, and Blanche had been bidden to remove the lilac from her belt as unbecoming in a Vicar's daughter, she and her father made their way to the Old House. The Vicar had donned his Sabbath coat over the gravy-spotted vest, and his Sunday boots—first wiping the residue of yesterday's dust from them on the inside edge of his coat tails—and he carried in his left hand the black kid gloves for state occasions that long usage had compressed to the size and substance of a cigar; whilst in his right hand he bore the vicarial stick without a ferrule, that had a beard at the end, which as he walked he pointed here and there to the familiar objects Blanche had seen scores of times and was sick of seeing; talking parochially all the while to get his vicarial voice in order, and have his words on flow when they were wanted.

But they were evidently not to be wanted that afternoon, for the Old House gate was shut and padlocked on the inner side, and though the Vicar tried it impotently a time or two, and hung by the gate awhile, dropping "Ah's" and "Oh's" and comments on the fact that the newcomers must evidently be out, in tones manifestly designed to reach their ears if they happened to be anywhere within the vicinity, the old house yielded no sign. Not a blind stirred, nor curtain blinked.

So there was nothing left for the callers—after a final half-hearted testing of the gate—but to return. Blanche slipped her father outside Deacon Smeddy's shop door, whilst he was telling Mrs. Taylor we must all submit, and there was One above. . . . He had just been calling (said he) upon the new residents, with his daughter . . . with his daughter . . . and looking first over his right shoulder and next over his left, said "Blanche!" in bewilderment. "What's got the girl? Where is she?" and shook his head despondently when Mrs. Taylor told him "She's gone, sir."

After all it was providential in one way that Blanche had done so, for a bicycle bell had been ringing for her all over Whivvle, and was just on the point of leaving when Blanche waved her hand—having on this occasion no twisted copy of the *Sunday Sacred* with her. In another way, however, Providence had played her false, for her desertion of her father served to reanimate his righteous fires, with the consequence that they had two graces and a sermon for tea, and sufficient Bible for supper to put a whole parish to sleep, and Blanche heard that whilst she wandered in company with the bicycle bell along Whivvle's least rideable lanes, the steel eye and the slender boy had been seen in the churchyard, stooping over tombstones. Blanche called Fondie a beast when he imparted the intelligence, saying, "You might have come and told us, Fondie!" and Fondie admitted that perhaps he had been to blame in not doing so, and that the thought had indeed come into his head, but he did not know where to find (Miss) Blanche at the moment—which Blanche declared was nothing but a mean excuse.

"You knew I must be somewhere, Fondie. I was only in the green lane with somebody. You could have come and looked for us if you'd liked. But you didn't like. All right, Fondie, I shan't forget you."

On the morrow, after slipping out of sight behind the clock the discolored visiting card that her father had reared in front of it as a reminder of the call still to be paid, Blanche eluded

the parental presence as soon as dinner was over, soliloquizing: "I don't want to be bothered with him!" and betook herself to the churchyard. With such trinkets as she could recapture, including (fortunately) the medallion, the vestry key in her pocket, and the all but annihilated Summer Double Bathing Number of *Tricky Topics* screwed up in her hand, she seated herself on the Sacred-to-the-memory-of-Jonas-Warkup ledger (also Sarah, relict of the above) where she passed a tedious and unprofitable hour. Neither among the tombs nor in the vicinity of the old house was her vigilance rewarded by any sign of the newcomers. Save that there were blinds and curtains behind the one window visible to the outer world through the overgrown gateway, and the house looked curiously unfamiliar in its new paint, and smoke rose idly from one chimney, the old vicarage might have been untenanted still, for all the signs of human life about it. Towards tea-time—or somewhat later—Blanche returned to face the parental wrath, and say how did she know the time was what it was? He ought to buy her a watch of her own—she'd often asked him. And how did she know where the card was? Which card did he mean? And how did she know he had wanted her to go with him this afternoon? He should have said so at dinner. What?

So she took the stockings off once more, and the bangles—deciding for the thousandth time that Whivvle was sickening.

XXIII

JUST as tomorrow was Blanche's day for doing all important duties, and next term the term for her to resume her scholastic studies, so Blanche's brother, by name Alexis—though more familiarly known to the district as Bullocky, by reason of his proclaimed ambition to act as beast-boy and drive cattle—was perpetually destined for the Hunmouth Grammar School, where he was to take scholarships in due

course, and go to college, and be "larned parsoning" (as Dod's father put it) like the Vicar.

In the meanwhile he attended the Whivvle church school, whither he had been sent in the first instance by his father partly to strengthen the schoolmaster's hands and raise the standard of the school; partly to furnish Whivvle with a parochial lesson in Christian equality, and propitiate the Non-conformist element in the parish, which was strong; and partly for reasons of economy, albeit these latter were not accentuated.

At the Whivvle school he wore corduroy breeches like the rest of his companions, that there might be no invidious and external distinctions between the Vicar's son and those he sat with; and such other distinctions as there were, or might have been, he nobly seconded his father's efforts to eliminate. He wore out his breeches at the seat and knees with the practiced manner of a ploughboy; kicked holes into the toes of his cobbled boots, attached by broken laces to legs that nobody would ever have suspected at first sight of being own brothers to Blanche's shapely pair, although some dim resemblance to Blanche might be described, on a close scrutiny, in the shallower depths of his light blue eyes.

As his tenure at the church school was reputedly short, he attached himself in no considerable degree to study, but rioted in the luxury of the lower standards, spelling as precariously as any hind's son, and speaking the ancient vernacular of the soil; saying like Blanche that he "didn't care," on the ground that he would be leaving next term, and nobody would be able "ti do owt at him" then.

So Blanche's brother, Bullocky, culling the full advantage of his position, learned as little as possible of what the schoolmaster had to impart, but lived his own life in his own industrious and vivid way, eschewing books as if they had been soap and water, and avowing openly to the village his determination to embrace no calling that involved orthography or the use of the pen. On Tuesday, which was killing day, he might frequently be found

at the butcher's, where he matriculated in all the principles and practice of this gory trade—bringing back an odor of the shambles and fresh-killed meat to the tea-table. At Christmas time he participated indefatigably in the massacre of the innocents, by which civilized and Christian people commemorate the nativity of the Savior of Mankind; and was the prime mover in the execution of the vicarage pig. At other seasons of the year he tramped behind dusty and perspiring herds in company with beast-lads; helped at shearings and sheep-dippings; learned farriery and pig-jobbing, and followed the itinerary of the neighboring shire horse, and knew the secret processes of nature as intimately, and revered them as little, as he did the order of his father's service. In addition he was an adept in the manufacture and manipulation of the catapult—being known to kill blue-bottles stone-dead on the church wall at thirty paces—and was the acknowledged leader in lawlessness of Whivvle's younger generation of sons. As a rule all feminine coöperation or companionship was despised—Blanche's younger brother not yet having reached the age when the art and practice of "lassing" was deemed among the manly virtues, and any girl—with the exception of his sister alone—who showed the least hankering to attach herself, however unostentatiously, to the Bullocky and his brigand followers, was discouraged in terms which lacked nothing on the score of clarity and forcefulness.

The rigid exclusiveness of the old house, that had first merely stimulated Blanche's brother's curiosity no less than her own, aggravated in the end his resentment. From chalking offensive symbols on the outer walls, he led his myrmidons at last to more audacious sallies. The old vicarage became the objective of secret expeditions and campaigns. Cryptic words were coined to express it in parlance. Passwords and countersigns were invented to serve the occult needs of the conspirators, who hoo-eed and hoo-hooed incessantly about the precincts as they prowled on all fours around its high walls at night. Various

forms of attack were conceived and executed, with such success that Blanche's brother was able to come home on the very evening of churchyard Tuesday with a new scratch from his eyebrow to his chin, and boast to Blanche that he had made a complete reconnaissance of the grounds, and had been at one time as close to the old man and his grandson as he was, at the moment of speaking, to Blanche.

Blanche said, "You're a liar," but he answered, "Liar yourself," and without waiting to argue the point of veracity further, undertook to take his dying oath that the facts were as related. The boy, said he, was on his hands and knees, digging up weeds from the garden pathway with a table-knife. The old man walked continually to and fro, with alternate hands laid over the bend in his back—first the right hand and then the left—with the palm outward. Blanche's brother could have put a pebble in as he passed if he'd wanted; only he didn't want.

Blanche asked, "What's he like?"—by which, of course, she meant the boy—and the Bullocky answered that he was all right, in a voice that expressed small opinion of all right, even at all right's best. "Is he good-looking?" Blanche inquired, and the Bullocky said, "He's a fond-looking devil." Blanche asked, "How old is he?" and the Bullocky retorted, "How div I know?" in a voice of scorn. "Older than you?" Blanche suggested hopefully, and the Bullocky's resentment of this suggested advantage in years elicited the darkling reply: "I could slog him wi' yan hand." "I don't believe you've seen him at all!" Blanche exclaimed as retaliation for her brother's grudging replies. "Where were you stood?" Her brother returned "Backside o' libollom (laburnum) tree"—an answer that seemed to satisfy all her requirements, for she questioned his veracity no further, and looked on the Bullocky with an eye of indifference for his paltry triumph.

"Well?"

"Well?" repeated the Bullocky in mocking tones.

"What if you were. There's nothing in that."

This flat disparagement of the Bullocky's achievement brought the flush of conflict to his forehead.

"Isn't there?" he demanded, with a sudden sharpening of eye and a menacing inflation of nostril.

"No, there isn't."

"*Thoo* dursn't do it!"

"*Dursn't* I?"

"No, *thoo* dursn't."

"I aren't frightened if you think I am."

"Do it, then."

"I could, easy."

"Do it, then."

"I say I could, easy, if I wanted."

"When?"

"Any time."

"Not tomorrow."

"Yes, tomorrow."

"Not after tea."

"Yes, after tea."

"Not ower wall."

"Yes, ower wall."

"*Thoo* dursn't throw a cap ower, an' fetch it."

"*Dursn't* I?"

"No, *thoo* dursn't."

"I'll let you see if I dursn't."

"*Thoo* says so."

"I will."

"Do it, then."

"All right, I will do it."

"*Thoo'll* do it when I'se there ti see thee?"

"Of course I will. What do you think? I aren't frightened of you."

"Tomorrow night, after tea?"

"Yes. Tomorrow night after tea."

"Ower yon wall?"

"Yes. Over yon wall."

XXIV

BLANCHE'S father had forbidden her to go out in the evening, saying that this was no time for a Vicar's daughter to be abroad, but there were signs that the Vicar's volcanic righteousness was subsiding, and the ashes of such wrath as still encumbered him were cold enough to be risked with impunity. So when he betook himself after tea, with a hammer and a handful of assorted nails and a roll of roofing-felt, to the hen-house, complaining that none of his children ever thought of taking these responsibilities off his shoulders, and that the poultry-shed might fall to pieces for all they cared, Blanche had no compunction in reassuming the Hunmouth stockings and her best white Sunday petticoat—as being appropriate to an eight-foot wall—and a superb assortment of jewelry, comprising three rings, five bracelets, and a hand-clasp brooch in amethysts and brilliants. With these, and a white canvas tennis hat on her head, and a bunch of blue forget-me-not strangulated in her belt, and in her hand the current number of *Tricky Topics* that a friend happened to leave behind him that afternoon, her preparations for the approaching ceremony were complete. By the time the Vicar had begun to call upon her name, and the names of his children in rotation, with increasing volume and impatience, from the hen-house roof—where, in an awkward and unclerical posture, he found himself at a loss for a pair of pincers—Blanche was already promenading her smile down the Whivvie High Street, as though she had not a parent or a trouble in the world. Fondie was just emerging from the wheelwright's yard, beneath the famous signboard, as Blanche swung by; and Blanche broadened her smile to its most ami-

cable dimensions and came to a standstill, saying "Hello!"

Fondie's sense of what was due to the Vicar's daughter, and the knowledge of his own place, effectually forbade a return of this colloquial greeting. Indeed, his curious politeness never made use of it at any time. To her brief but very friendly "Hello!" he raised his cap and returned a polite "Good evening, Miss Blanche," and lowered his eyes respectfully before hers that never blinked.

"Where are you off?" asked the Vicar's daughter without any abatement of her big smile, looking dispassionately up and down from his new-brushed boots to his recently washed face and the green mixture cloth cap that he wore for all non-working occasions save Sunday. As Fondie held a roll of music under his left armpit, and had his second best suit on, and his hands as clean as a scrubbing-brush and scouring-stone could make them, there was little need for Blanche to ask the question. And indeed she laid no stress on it, for almost in the same breath, and before Fondie could tell her what she already knew, she said, "Come along with us, Fondie."

Such an invitation, issuing from such a source, was enough to make Fondie's heart play fivers with his ribs. He drew the music-roll from under his armpit and unrolled and rerolled it disquietedly, saying with an increase in color: "I should only like ti, Miss Blanche."

"Well, come along, then," the Vicar's daughter bade him. And as he did not immediately respond to the command, asked, "What are you stopping for?"

Fondie was stopping because of that fatal sense of obligation and duty that played such havoc with the Devil in him, and effectually routed all the bad resolutions he ever had the fortitude to make that would have improved him so immeasurably had he only possessed the courage to act upon them. Hence his name, appropriately enough, Fondie.

"... I'se jealous," Fondie began apologetically, coerced by his tyrannizing conscience that—Oh, how desperately!—he

struggled to ignore, ". . . I'se jealous it'll not have to be ti-night, Miss Blanche. My aunt's expecting me." The very mention of the word "aunt" as any reason for inability or conscientious scruple caused the lines of Blanche's ample smile to curve in incredulous scorn to the inquiry, "What if she is?"

"She'll mebbe be stood waiting o' me noo," Fondie explained, "again gate."

"Well, let her wait then," said Blanche intolerantly. "More fool her. She won't wait long. I shouldn't. Surely to goodness you're big enough to please yourself what you do without asking her, Fondie."

Fondie admitted the justice of the remark with his momentary modest smile, saying, why, in a way he was, and why, in another way, he wasn't, Miss Blanche; and he misdooted even at best o' times he thought overmuch about pleasing himself, and not enough about pleasing other people. And as Vicar very wisely observed . . .

"Oh, shut up!" Blanche broke in abruptly, her patience though not her smile exhausted by this disposition on Fondie's part to sermonize. "It's sickening. I didn't come to be talked to about him. I can get plenty of him at home. Particularly these last few days. He's been awful. Nothing but what folks *ought* to do." She let her blue eyes wander over Fondie's music-roll with a look of resentment in them for this silent evidence and mute reproach of duty. "You're always practicing. I don't know how you can. I hate it. What good does it do you?"

"Why, I'se jealous not a deal," Fondie modestly confessed. "But my awn intelligence mun be blamed for that, Miss Blanche. I misdoot I shouldn't play any better if I practiced less."

Blanche told him he played well enough for Whivvle as it was, and he was a fool to play better than he needed. Who'd shut themselves up in a stuffy room and play silly old music

if they could get out of doors and enjoy themselves? "He"—and the pronoun needed no previous substantive to explain it—"he thinks I'm practicing now"—which was scarcely correct, for the Vicar had by this time descended from the hen-roof, finding all invocation of the names of Blanche and Alexis in vain, and was blowing sighs of despondency through a deserted vicarage, with the query, how was it possible to expect a blessing on such a home?—" . . . but I aren't. And I don't intend to. Why should I have to practice at night? I was practicing this morning. Practicing only makes me hate it. I could stand the piano all right if it wasn't for practice." She gave a characteristic touch to her belt, slipping her thumb between the leather and her waist, at the same time making a circular and expansive movement with her body as though seeking escape from all form of corporal and intellectual imprisonment. "Well? Are you coming or aren't you? I aren't going to stop all night." And she began to recede slowly from Fondie, step by step, walking backward, with her provocative and glorious smile shining still upon his face, like a rich September moon, drumming on her chin with the tubular copy of *Tricky Topics*, as though to challenge him: "You dursn't. You dursn't. I don't care. I can go with myself. You needn't come if you don't like. Some folks wouldn't want to be asked twice."

Fondie thought of his aunt, and he thought (great heaven, how he thought!) of Blanche; and he weighed duty in the balance against desire, and desire against duty, as Blanche slowly receded. And first duty weighed more than desire, but with every footstep backward that Blanche took, desire grew into a more substantial and ponderable thing. And the Devil came close up to Fondie's elbow, saying: "What! Diz thoo hesitate, Fondie? Thy aunt will keep while ti-morrow, if need be. Blanche is worth a thousand aunts. Is thoo boon ti loss chance when thoo's had it gien thee? Thoo can tell thy aunt thoo had a job ti do at last moment. Quick! There's

another step gone already. Stop her! Say summat. Ask wheer she wants ti gan ti?"

And Fondie asked, at the Devil's dictation: "If I mud venture ti ask question, Miss Blanche, wheer is it you're going ti?"

To which Miss Blanche, ever receding, answered:

"Come and see."

"Thoo's lost that!" said the Devil. "Mek haste wi' thee. Ask her how long she's boon ti be?"

And Fondie asked, as the Devil prompted him: "Shall you be oot o' course long, Miss Blanche?"

"How do I know?" answered Blanche.

"Thoo fool!" hissed the Devil. "Thoo's lost again. Thoo knows very well she won't be long. Another moment an' she'll have her back tonned, an' thoo wean't fin' courage ti follow then. Say thoo thinks thoo can spare her a few minutes."

And Fondie said:

"Nobbut you won't be si long, Miss Blanche, I might mebbe spare you a few minutes."

"You can please yourself," retorted Blanche, who had invited Fondie to accompany her for no reason at all, or for little better reason than that he came conveniently for the invitation, and also, perhaps, because the sun lit up his face very pleasantly and showed his fresh complexion and white teeth and brown eyes to advantage. But there were other teeth and eyes and complexions in the world besides Fondie's. "Nobody's forcing you. You hadn't need unless you like." With which she reversed her rearward motion, and turned her back upon Fondie even as the Devil had predicted, so that Fondie believed for a moment she was done with him, and stood stock still, not venturing to advance after such a plain indication of indifference, and trying to make his conscience believe that he had acted according to its dictates after all, and had never wavered in the allegiance he owed it, or the respect due to his

aunt. But Blanche showed the big smile over her shoulder once again provocatively, out of sheer self-respect—thinking in turn that Fondie hesitated whether to follow her or not; and, of course, if he had not, it would have been a reverse for the smile—and the Devil pushed Fondie by the shoulder, and ran with him as far as Blanche's swinging hand.

XXV

ONCE abreast of Blanche, however, the Devil deserted Fondie shamelessly, leaving him to his own devices, so that Fondie had hard work to think of anything in the world to say, except that it was a dry summer; and nothing in the world to ask, save such questions as how Blanche had left her father, and did she happen to have any idea what hymns the Vicar was likely to choose for Sunday—questions that Fondie was aware were too hopeless even to utter, though they held his mind at bay like the fabled dog in the manger, barking all its more pertinent and serious thoughts away.

If Blanche happened to walk into the wheelwright's yard while Fondie was at work, and ask, "What are you doing there, Fondie?"—as she sometimes did when the moments dragged—Fondie could answer her with self-possession enough in his own modest way, misdoubting his ability to explain this, or make the other clear, with more lucidity than Blanche's butterfly intelligence always cared to be bothered with. But when Fondie found himself in her company without any substantial matter between them to justify their conjunction, his tongue failed him, and he sighed for the craft of the quick thinker. And then, between the pride that felt itself so palpitatingly elated to be in Blanche's company, and the modesty that recognized itself no fit associate for the Vicar's daughter, the mere physical act of walking was changed, and Fondie had a curious

sense of practicing some new and intricate art of locomotion in which, as yet, he was most lamentably unlearned.

Nor was Blanche the most comfortable of companions for unpracticed modesty to walk with, for she attracted far too many eyes. The blankest of wall-ends showed a forehead or a pair of eyebrows when she passed by, and her progress was perpetually signalized by curious vocalisms and discreet whistles from every side of her, that caused her to turn her spacious smile this way and that, or, without turning, wave the *Tricky Topics* in the air. Even if the sound had no visible source, Blanche knew infallibly whose mouth had shaped it, and would reply with an acknowledgment in kind, very like, but not quite so loud, saying to Fondie: "It's So-and-So, or So-and-Sol!" and apostrophizing the creator with the utmost friendliness as Silly Fool—Silly Fool being merely Blanche's synonym for lots of things, including many that were quite complimentary and nice. Some of these signals, on the occasion in question, were directly inspired by Fondie's presence, being intended to signify that Fondie was going it, and must not flatter himself that his gallantry passed unobserved—for all his modesty allowed sufficient space between his unworthy self and the Vicar's daughter for Jarge Amery to push a wheelbarrow through.

The old vicarage, as all who have studied geography must know, stands on the west side of Whivvle, not farther from the church than a devout worshipper might reasonably walk in wet weather, and divided from it by the Green or Lover's Lane which blossoms with cowslips in spring, and with hawthorn and wild roses in summer, and brambles and tansy in autumn, and with kisses nearly all the year round—particularly by starlight. Both the vicarage and the church are secluded in their own trees. After summer has once set in, the church tower is not seen again, save by church-goers, until October, when the northeast winds—blowing briny from the North Sea—strip the yellowing leaves from the elms as ruthlessly as Dod's mother plucks the feathers from poultry on a Thursday night; casting

them down by myriads upon the graves; and the gray tower grows daily more visible through the branches. One might fancy, in June, that the elms were so much higher than the church tower that nothing was to be gained by an ascent to the leads, but when Blanche said "Come on!" and one came, it was surprising what there was to see. One could see, indeed, the sea itself—or the light from it—in fine weather; a dozen miles away, or more, as the crow flies. And one could see the old vicarage slates and chimneys, but no windows (save in autumn). And one could see the fields too, and whosoever was working in them at the time, and three parts of the red roofs of Whivvle.

It was across the fields that Blanche and Fondie went. The first was barley in those days, which Fondie remarked looked like making a nice crop. Blanche plucked a head of still green barley, and after trying it over her own smoothly rounded cheek, tickled Fondie's neighboring ear with the provocative and titillating awns. If Fondie had been half a man, of course, he would have retaliated in kind; but Fondie suffered the attention with the decorum and respect due to the daughter of the Vicar, telling himself, "It's naught but Miss Blanche's fun. She has confidence I shouldn't tek advantage on it." And even when Blanche exclaimed, almost with disgust, "Goodness, Fondie. Aren't you ticklish at *all*?" Fondie merely said he misdooted he wasn't, and Blanche tossed the barley head back to the field it came from, as though barley were sickening, and she didn't care.

The second field was wheat, and the third oats—with a narrow flat of tares for harvest fodder. Fondie helped Blanche punctiliously over every stile in turn, offering her a hand, and bidding her take care—stiles was not ti trist (trust) to. Tradition has it that at each one he shut his eyes like a gentleman—without specifying which gentleman—and that at the last, between the flat of tares and the wurzel field, where the stile was higher than all the rest and had a step missing, he said he

misdoated it was no road for a lady, and after all they would have done better to come round by road. At which—so tradition says—Blanche exclaimed: "Oh, bother! You *are* a silly fool, Fondie. You're too slow for a funeral. I aren't going to stop here all night"—and was over by a sort of catherine-wheel movement, before Fondie had time to close his eyes.

That is, of course, what tradition says. But it is a fact that Blanche did hesitate at this stile—which is the last one that cannot be seen from the roadway, and is grandly situated for sentiment and lovers' misunderstandings. And it is a fact that Fondie did remark it was an awkward stile, and Blanche did say: "Bother! How am I to get over this, Fondie?"—as though she had never got over scores of times before, with and without assistance, and was even now on her way to scale an eight-foot wall. Had only the Devil come to Fondie's aid and given him a little timely instruction as to the object and traditional function of stiles, Blanche would have been prepared to stay and enjoy Fondie's company in this appropriate spot, for, in truth, his face looked nicer than she had known it for a long time, in the reddening sunlight. She did, indeed, seat herself on the top rail; and she even said, "There's room for you too, Fondie," gathering up the outspread folds of her frock to make place for him on the rail alongside. But Fondie—telling himself that she had only invited him for politeness' sake, and that it did not beseem him to presume upon this token of her consideration and seat himself in such intimate proximity to the Vicar's daughter—only thanked her with his customary modesty and said he wasn't tired and could stand very well. He was used to it.

So Blanche surmounted the stile as she had surmounted the others, with no assistance beyond that extended by Fondie's correct right hand, and renounced all hope of Fondie for the thousandth time. Fondie was hopeless. Fondie was sickening. One might as well go for a walk with a wet umbrella.

Blanche's pride could not even satisfy itself whether Fondie cared for her or not. Sometimes she ascribed his studious politeness to modesty, at other times to indifference—of all qualities the hardest to bear. But she consoled herself with the reflection that Fondie Bassiemoor was a silly fool, and turning her thoughts once again into their original channel, led him with a quicker tread to the home of the newcomers.

XXVI

THE intrepid Bullocky had already made reconnaissance of the outer walls. Blanche and Fondie could hear the sinister owl-like signals that he exchanged with his myrmidons, as far away as the last field. These ceased before they came in sight of the old house, and they arrived to find Blanche's brother propped morosely against the brickwork of the wall with his hands in his corduroy pockets, and a scowl of unutterable malignance on his visage—having at length come to the conclusion that Blanche had broken her word and betrayed him, and that he would have his revenge on her for this before the night was out.

"I'll mek oor lass knaw about it!" he declared with emphasis. "I will an' all. I knaw where she's gotten summut hid—summut particlar. Summut she'll be wantin' timorrow. I'll shove it i' pond."

Blanche's appearance in conjunction with Fondie dispelled some of the darkness on the invective Bullocky's brow—or such of it as could be removed without recourse to soap. Nevertheless he greeted her with the scorn suitable to a malinger, saying, "So thoo's come at last," and accused her of not having dared to come any sooner. "Thoo nobbut come noo," said he with ingenious and perverted logic, "because thoo expected I was gone, an' thoo could say thoo'd been and missed me."

"I've come straight here," answered Blanche decisively. "Haven't I, Fondie?"

Bullocky, still pressing an unmollified posterior against the wall, acquiesced derisively:

"Aye! Across fields!" as though there existed something very derogatory to courage in this particular route.

"Across fields!" repeated Blanche, with sarcastic mimicry of her brother's voice. "Well! What if I did! We were walking all the time. We didn't sit down once." There was almost reproach in the emphasis with which she affirmed this. "Ask Fondie."

"Ask Fondie thysen," the Bullocky rejoined. "Who cares what Fondie says!"

It was quite true. Who cared what Fondie said? Nobody cared what Fondie said. And yet, had Fondie been so minded, and possessed a conscience less pitted with objectionable scruples, he might perhaps have made Blanche care a great deal for what he said. And certainly he could have wrung such incontinent respect out of Blanche's brother with one hand as might have been heard a mile off on a night like this. However, this brief preliminary had the advantage of heating Blanche's blood and raising the temperature of her courage, without which few enterprises involving personal peril can be brought to a triumphant issue. She cut short any further public reproaches that her brother might be tempted to level at her, with a peremptory: "Well. I'm here now, anyway. So you can shut up. Where do you reckon you got over?"

Blanche's brother indicated, without speaking, the least scalable portion of the wall with a dusty and shameless boot.

"That's a lie," said Blanche. "You never did."

He indicated another part of the wall, scarcely less formidable, by the same means—for he began to have the fear that Blanche would too easily obliterate the brilliancy of his own achievement if he suffered the test to be conducted on equal terms.

"Did he?" Blanche asked the ring of satellites, and uttered a triumphant and derisive "Ah!" when their uncertain silence betrayed his treachery. "Clever! I knew he didn't. He couldn't. I don't believe even Fondie could. Where was it? Was it anywhere? Here?"

Despite her brother's offensive "Fin' oot!" and his secret admonitory scowl that sought to make accomplices of his myrmidons, one of their number—impelled by the magnetism of Blanche's blue eye—shook a recusant head and pointed with a surreptitious finger to a remote part of the wall, but Blanche said she didn't care. "I aren't frightened. This is easy enough for me. I'll get up here and show him."

Now that the precise nature of Blanche's undertaking became explicit, Fondie developed a grave and dissuasive face. Being no lawbreaker in the least, and never having stolen a single orchard apple in his life, the mere thought of scaling somebody's else wall and trespassing in somebody's else grounds troubled his conscience. Had the prospective trespasser, indeed, been any other than Blanche he would have solemnly misdoubted his ability to lend further countenance to such illicit proceedings, and would have taken a mournful leave after the administration of a pious warning. But to desert Blanche, or to rebuke her publicly, even in the most circumlocutory and respectful fashion, was unthinkable. He did, to be sure, try his modest best to dissuade her from this perilous enterprise, hinting at its unsuitability for a lady by grave misgivings as to the height of the wall and the danger of accidents, but Blanche cried "Bosh!" to accidents, and "Oh, shut up, Fondie!" when Fondie's perturbed lips invoked consideration of the Vicar, in a humble voice lowered for Blanche's ear alone—"I don't want to think about him. I don't care. I aren't going to go back now, if you think I am. You're as sickening as father." She pushed out the copy of *Tricky Topics* to the nearest of Bullocky's followers with a brief: "Take hold," and going up flat to the wall, and spreading out both hands against it in a posture of

invocation, horrified Fondie by suddenly bidding him: "Give us a leg."

The bashful blood coursed up to Fondie's forehead at the abrupt demand upon his resourcefulness, as it did in church when an unexpected Amen took him by surprise, and Bullocky's observant retinue saw that he was almost on the brink of misdoubting something—as indeed he was. He was misdoubting the propriety of Blanche's ascent to such an elevation before the semicircle of attentive eyes that watched her, and would have liked to bid the Bullocky's myrmidons retire, since they displayed no tendency to practice this natural act of politeness unprompted. But the leg was already awaiting him in its Hunmouth stocking, kicking demonstratively in token of impatience, while Blanche's mouth against the brickwork cried, "Come on, Fondie! What are you waiting for?" and Fondie took the shapely member in both hands as reverently and delicately as he could, without looking at it. Some confused and vague, though curiously distinct and subtle, sense—a swift and newborn sense with which he seemed never to have had any previous acquaintance—told him that what his two hands held with a desperate endeavor not to translate to his intelligence by any sinful operation of touch, was wondrously substantial, smooth, and rounded, and warmed with a strange and unterrestrial warmth. At the first moment of contact, even, he believed that the member palpitated—but that, he subsequently discovered, was his own heart.

"One. Two. Three!" said Blanche, and at the third count she made a superb spring for the coping of the wall. Fondie contributed all the assistance of which his troubled propriety was capable, but it cannot have been very much, for after a paroxysm of ineffectual clutching at the summit, Blanche came down to earth again to tell Fondie that he hadn't given her half a leg—which is probably true.

But at the third attempt—though Fondie would have been willing to accept the failure of the other two as a plain indica-

tion on the part of Providence that the enterprise was unblest, and that the wall had never been designed for a lady—the leg did not come down again. To Blanche's urgent cry "Push!" it went up like a rocket as far as Fondie's outstretched arm could follow, kicking, in company with its fellow, a tattoo upon the brickwork; and when at last, having received the sanction of Blanche's voice, Fondie ventured to raise his eyes (professing at first to be occupied in wiping his brow), the leg was serenely swinging like a pendulum above him, and Blanche's smile was radiating triumph from the coping-stone.

It was, as all the spectators well remember, a glorious evening in latter June. The sky was milky blue; the air itself warm and mild as milk new-drawn from the udder; the sun, wrapped already in the brown mists of the horizon, as round and red as a new penny. All above the old house the swifts or devil-squallers were wheeling in their joyous flight, playing their tireless games of tag in the breezeless sky. Thrushes and black-birds in noisy competition were pouring out their evensong, and the undisturbed fragrance of a thousand near and distant blossoms, of lilac and laburnum and the still-lingering may, rose up into the warm air and filled it. Of itself the evening was beautiful enough, but the spirit of adventure commingling with its balmy loveliness imparted to all these sounds and scents a curiously poignant beauty.

Blanche, seated on the coping of the wall in a part where its glassy defenses were now too occasional and too blunt to prove any obstacle, looked down on one side of her upon the uplifted faces of Fondie and her brother's company. On the other her gaze encountered the ragged laurels and hollies that constituted the outskirts of the old vicarage shrubbery, out of which rose the opaque trunks of the larger trees; beech and sycamore and elm. Over her head a great chestnut spread its leafy branches far out beyond the lane, affording such shelter that, save in the very wettest weather, more than half the road-way nearest to the wall was perpetually dry.

Of the house itself Blanche was able to discern little more than a mere vestige of its walls through the thick green intercepting leaves, enriched by the last beams of the setting sun; but from her previous excursions she knew exactly in what relation she sat toward it—although, to be sure, she had always taken the northeast passage before. Situated where she was, the merit of her brother's accomplishment grew upon her. Fondie's upturned face looked a long way off, and strangely ominous and disquieted, as though he saw some peril invisible to Blanche. Perhaps, after all, she might have been open to dissuasion, even at this late hour, from the right quarter; but the right quarter unfortunately knew its place too well to attempt dissuasion a second time in the case of the Vicar's daughter, and only said "he begged she would take care" and "he wouldn't like owt ti happen her," and the Bullocky—quick to detect the transient hesitation behind Blanche's changeless smile, proclaimed to his followers: "She's funky. Oor lass is funky. She dursn't lig ower and let go."

"Who dursn't !" retaliated Blanche, and after that no dissuasion from the earth below or the heaven above would have moved her. Fondie, disquieted by the accent of determination in Blanche's voice, made a last attempt to appease the callings of his conscience.

"I misdoot you shouldn't attempt it, Miss Blanche," he said. "Master Alexis dizn't mean it i' arnest. He onnly spoke i' fun."

Master Alexis, showing fury in his eyes, demanded: "What's up wi' thoo, Fondie Bassiemoor? Shut thy mouth."

Fondie admitted with sufficient humility to pacify a potentate that it did not beseem him to interfere. "But I'se jealous I oughtn't ti stand by an' let you do it, Miss Blanche," he said.

His choice of the verb "let" was perhaps unfortunate. The Bullocky demanded: "Who's thoo, Fondie Bassiemoor, ti say thoo'll 'let' onnybody? Diz thoo think oor lass'll let hersen be 'let' by thoo?"

And Blanche said: "Oh, shut up. I aren't going to be put off now. Throw us your cap, Fondie."

Fondie, though with misgivings as to the purpose for which his headgear was required, as also the complications in which it might be involved, threw it up without demur—apologizing for his inability to offer it by hand, and modestly wishing it had been a better one, though mebbe it would sarve. Blanche caught it with a hand made deft by long practice in parrying and administering blows, and after turning a look of scorn toward the contumelious Bullocky, and asking him "Who dursn't?" once again, flung Fondie's week-night cap into the shrubbery with a movement as decisive as it was vivacious.

"There!" she cried, and showed her empty hands. "It's gone."

With that, before the intoxicating effects of the audacious act could pass away from the countenances that looked up at her, and were—for the nonce—collaborators in her courage, she swung the Hunmouth stockings boldly over the wall and lowered herself from sight. The last thing she noticed before descent was Fondie smoothing his hair. The last thing Fondie saw was Blanche's two hands with the jeweled fingers that clutched the coping; the last thing but one, her unchangeable smile. Then the coping was suddenly fingerless. Fondie and the other witnesses heard the descending scrape of shoes; and in the silence that ensued Fondie heard (though none of the other witnesses did) the stern voice of his father rebuke him:

"What! Thoo helped lass ti climb wall, an' gied her thy cap ti fling ower! Thoo's as fond as pudding."

And then he heard—though none of the other witnesses heard it—the voice of Blanche calling on him by name, and saying in accents of suffering bravely borne:

"Fondie . . . Fondie . . ."

And it came into his mind: What if she had broken her leg—the precious leg she had held out for him, and he had given her, and never looked at?

XXVII

BUT Blanche had not broken her leg. She had not even torn the Hunmouth stocking—though she thought she had. She had only cracked the remnants of a marmalade pot, and barked her knee, and the word she uttered was certainly not “Fondie”—which shows how a zealous listener may be misled by his imagination.

Her first act on descent—a descent signalized by the noisy exodus of a startled and startling blackbird bick-bicking through the branches of a beech—was to displace the upper part of the Hunmouth stocking and investigate the nature of her injury, revealing to the hamadryads of this secluded glade a knee such as an observant sculptor might have premised and longed to make imperishable in stone. In the luminous half-light of the leaf-screened shrubbery the flesh gleamed alabaster white, but in truth it was kindled with that pale and barley-colored gold that suffused Blanche’s neck, and came out on her cheeks in the form of finest down; blazing with final richness and luster in her hair and brows. On the knee bent upward for inspection was a graze of the circumference of a five-shilling piece, through which the blood oozed as Blanche studied it, and sufficiently painful to justify the original comment passed upon it; as also a second of the same species when Blanche saw the justification of the first.

Then, having advanced the wounded member to her lips and taken a hasty lick at the abrasion, she drew up her stocking, arranged her garter, smoothed her frock, and possessed herself of Fondie’s week-night cap, which lay at a despondent angle on the ivy but a yard away. After that she straightened herself and stood for a moment studying the question of return. Should she try to climb back by the route already taken, and make a triumphant reappearance before the incredulous eyes of her attendants—still glued, she felt assured, upon that part

of the wall where her person had last been seen; or should she seek some easier place to scale; or should she add a brighter glory to her achievement by some further, more audacious exploration of the grounds?

She was still debating the important matter when she became all at once most startlingly aware that one of the stationary objects accepted carelessly by her consciousness for a tree-trunk all this while was in fact no tree-trunk in the least, but a human figure like her own, though of the opposite sex, motionless and observant. It stood but as far again from her as Fondie's cap had been, in the thick of the shrubbery between a half prostrate laurel and a golden holly, and must have been an attentive witness of her descent and subsequent operations—a reflection that heightened Blanche's color several degrees in a moment, bringing all the latent gold into her neck, and causing her to say some very personal things to herself, inside. Her chief consolation was that, at least, they were the Hunmouth pair. And she consoled herself: "What if he did see? It's his fault for standing there. I don't care. I aren't frightened of him."

And to prove that she told herself the truth, she unfolded her smile like a big white flower; tooth after tooth, until the very heart of it was revealed—or rather, to be exact, the smile unfolded itself spontaneously and irresistibly, so that in the twilight it gleamed like a great guelder-rose.

As a rule Blanche's smile was a quick friend-maker. She had only to display it—for preference, sideways, or over her shoulder—and there seemed no end of smile companions ready to be sociable and beam their very best. But the eyes fixed attentively upon it now, for all they were not unfriendly, were singularly sober. They were eyes of a deep and almost sorrowful gray, and would look (Blanche thought) quite nice in the twilight, a little closer. The brows were finely and evenly penciled; the mouth fragile by comparison with Blanche's generous organ of speech and coquetry. In actual stature he

was perhaps only slightly taller than the Vicar's daughter, but the slender habit of his growth gave an effect of height much greater, and the fact that his coat sleeves were palpably too short and that some inches of white wrist intervened between the hand and the coat cuff accentuated the general impression of overgrowth. The modeling of his face, moreover, was all upon the bone, drawing no aid from that plump reinforcement of flesh which lent Blanche's countenance so much of its charm. As he preserved without any change of expression or attitude the position of attentive spectator in which Blanche had just discovered him, betraying no tendency to break the silence or reciprocate her smile by ever so encouragingly little, she slipped her thumb in her belt and straightened her body with the familiar movement, half defiant, half persuasive, and volunteered the remark that he had caught her nicely, and she had never expected to find anybody down there.

"Were you stood there when I got over?" she asked him. "Were you?"

The grave lips answered, very softly, "Yes."

Blanche protested: "Go on! You never were! You hadn't need. I don't believe you!" and laughed a coy Lancastrian color once more, putting her handkerchief before the big white smile to show how embarrassed the smile felt. It was a clean white handkerchief with a half-inch lace border—far cleaner than any that the Vicar ever held to view as an aid to sentimental piety or exegesis, having been washed in the bathroom only that morning, and dosed with diluted Clover Essence before Blanche left home, in case anybody might want to snatch it out of her hand and read the initials in the corner: that being an accepted procedure of flirtation in Blanche's day.

But the figure confronting Blanche betrayed not the least sign of intimacy with those familiar customs of the country, and seemed as innocent of the etiquette attaching to handkerchiefs as Fondie himself, and as sparing of his smiles. He made no use at all of Blanche's splendid overture, but let it lapse;

merely inquiring, with the impersonal gravity of a medical man, if she had hurt her knee. He spoke a fragile porcelain variety of English that to Blanche's ear seemed almost too delicate for daily use (like much of the district china), though she found the pattern very pretty and genteel, and was instantly filled with a desire to take this voice up into the belfry through the two trap-doors and show it Whivvle from the tower leads. And having now decided that the voice pertained to the Fondie species, and hadn't anything "off," and was unlikely to say anything at all provocative of a flick with the scented handkerchief, she reduced her smile to that lesser degree of it that served her for serious conversation, and asked the figure what its name was. The figure, after sufficient hesitation to make Blanche prompt it with a "Tell us! Go on! You might!" confided "Lancelot"—which Blanche had never met with before out of *Storyettes* and *Sunday Sacreds*.

"Lancelot what?"

"Lancelot . . . Griffith."

"Griffith?—Is that your surname?"

The boy hesitated again, and Blanche fancied his color deepened as though he stood on the verge of some disinclination or reluctance, but she made her voice very persuasive, and her smile very beseechful, and prompted him: "Tell us! Go on! You might!"—and he said, after a glance over his shoulder:

"Lancelot Griffith D'Arcy Mersham."

"Are those all your names?"

"Yes."

"All you've got?"

The boy expressed a silent acquiescence with his lips.

In books Blanche would have treated all these romantic names with pronounced sobriety and veneration. But to find them in real life, centered in one individual possessed of a thin though very kissable face, opened the throttle of her smile again, out of which Blanche's most knowing and sceptic voice emerged, telling him to "Go on!" and "Those weren't his

names!" and "What *do* they call you? Tell us. You *are* too bad!" But as the gray eyes seemed to accept no credit for any humorous trial of her credulity, she had the grace to modify this sagacious repudiation by asking, "Are they really?" To which the boy, without any show of resentment for her recent doubting of his word, said "Yes." After that Blanche eased her curiosity of quite a number of questions. He had been here nearly a fortnight, hadn't he? That was his grandfather, wasn't it? Where had they gone to the other afternoon? Why did he never come out? Why didn't he come to church? Did he ever go for walks with himself? Blanche did.

To some of her questions Blanche scarcely yielded adequate space for a reply, but linked question to question in strings of half a dozen. To the hindmost of such a string of interrogatives the boy would give, perhaps, a timid, semi-satisfactory answer, and it did not occur to Blanche until later, and too late, to reflect that all the while he spoke or listened to her his countenance revealed a strained and divided attention, as though the finer and more critical portion of his hearing were occupied elsewhere. In the absorption of their *tête-à-tête*, indeed, Blanche's conscience had lost all thought of a bareheaded and disconsolate Fondie, gazing upward at the wall-top from the lane beyond, and of the lurking terror of the chisel-cold eye, to which Mrs. Marfitt testified, and concerning whose potency the Bullocky had spoken in terms of too utter disrespect to hide a proper awe. All at once, however, the surprised dilation of the boy's eyes in the direction of the wall-top behind her, accompanied by a sound of boots in desperate conflict with brickwork, recalled Blanche's thoughts to Fondie and her friends without, whilst Fondie's own face, contorted almost beyond recognition in a supreme output of muscular force, rose suddenly over the coping, to receive the unexpected greeting of Blanche's mocking laugh, destitute of the least vestige of mercy for superfluous anxieties, and be asked what it wanted.

The sight of Blanche, safe and sound and utterly uncon-

cerned, in familiar conversation with an unfamiliar figure, took away more of Fondie's breath than all the scaling of the wall. He blinked between apology and embarrassment, pricked by desire to explain the reason of his impolite intrusion, and the conscious inability to do so, stammering: "I'll ask your pardon, Miss Blanche. . . . I didn't mean ti . . . si long as you're safe. . . ."

"Of course I'm safe!" Blanche retorted, quite ungrateful for all Fondie's solicitude, and regardless of his capless condition. "What did you think I was? You *are* a silly fool, Fondie!" And she chose that moment to burst out into laughter. The laugh was ungenerous, ill-considered, and ill-timed. Fondie saw the boy look suddenly over his shoulder towards the house, and heard him say: "Hush! He's in the garden. He'll hear you! . . ." and almost at the same moment a larger, whiter, more osseous hand than the boy's pushed aside the branches of the laurel by which he stood, and a fourth figure was added to the group, and the cold chisel-gray eye pierced the shrubbery and chilled the face of each spectator in turn, one after the other.

It looked at Lancelot Griffith D'Arcy Mer sham, and all four names flagged before it like cabbage-leaves in a time of drought. And it looked at Blanche, and Blanche's smile remained—but only the smile: the white teeth and outer integument of the look of laughter, like an oyster-shell with the priceless pearl abstracted. And it looked at Fondie. Fondie had been on the brink of apologizing to Blanche for his thoughtless intrusion, and saying he would wait for her at the other side, and it didn't matter about his cap, she wasn't to trouble about it. But the sudden appearance of the steel eye turned this contemplated retirement into base desertion, and made any departure in this present crisis unthinkable. So he hung where he was, with his elbows on the coping and his toes alternately struggling for foothold against the bricks without, and assumed as contrite and apologetic a look as the posture (which was pre-

carious, and imposed a great strain on the muscles of the leg and back and forearm) made possible.

Many in Fondie's predicament would have professed their inability to hold on, and would have slipped down from the wall, breathing on their palms at the bottom, and showing everybody around them how red and sore these were. But that was not Fondie's way—least of all where Blanche was concerned. He never even thought of the expedient, but clung to Blanche and to the wall, as fond as fond, mutely trying to draw away from the Vicar's daughter all the looks of blame and censure that the cold gray eyes emitted, and gather their steely prongs in his own unworthy and inconsiderable person.

XXVIII

THE new tenant of the old house, and the proprietor of those terrible gray eyes, was—despite the stoop wrought by antiquity in his shoulders—commandingly tall. The eyes themselves were made more formidable by brows that seemed to embattle them; bushy gray brows with wiry out-works, from which the gaze issued as straight as a lance, piercing and relentless. His head was hatless, like the boy's, and like Fondie's too; and the thin, long white hairs upon it—that did not suffice to conceal the bloodless whiteness of his high forehead and domed skull—seemed instinct with their owner's annoyance, so that each single hair appeared to participate in his displeasure and express it. Through her recessive smile Blanche noted that his skin was reticulated with myriads of minute lines and wrinkles, crossing and recrossing in every direction; that there were pouches beneath his eyes—puffy receptacles, it seemed, for wrath; that his nose was thin and hatchet-shaped and authoritative and very stern; that his mouth trembled—whether habitually or under stress of present indignation Blanche was unable to decide; and that he wore old-

fashioned garments and a curious collar. The collar came only halfway round his neck and stopped below the ears; a high sharp-edged white collar, secured by a broad black cravat that made a big bow for his Adam's apple to rest on. She did not notice until later that he wore a check tweed suit with square tails to the coat, and spacious outside pockets on the skirts; or that his tweed trousers terminated in a number of accordion pleats over gaiters. Fondie saw that from the first, because he was much higher, and the sight of these legislative and magisterial appendages, associated in his mind with Members of Parliament and Petty Sessions, lent nothing to the peace of it. He misdooted Blanche had made a grave mistake, and wished—with another Channel hiccup as one of his boots failed him—that he had acted like a man from the first and forbidden the Vicar's daughter to risk her name and reputation in this profitless adventure.

At last, after what seemed an interminable time of scrutiny, the old man's voice was heard. Once upon a time the voice had been a telling organ enough, and it was quite telling enough even now for most of its present auditors, but it revealed the ravages of age like his shoulders, and his hair and collar, and the rest of him. The deep diapason core of the voice was gone; only the fibrous investiture remained, that preserved the external bigness of the old-time sound without the volume.

"Who are you?" the voice demanded, and the gray eyes fixed the inquiry upon Blanche with a look that allowed of no equivocation, though Fondie's heart yearned to take the question to himself and say: "If he mud venture ti answer question that wasn't addressed tiv him, young lady wasn't si much ti blame as his-sen, sir."

Blanche gave her name—the real name, after all, and not one of the several names she had been composing during the recent silence; deciding in the end that such deception would be of no ultimate avail, and that her father must inevitably come to learn of her delinquency.

"Blanche Bellwood," she said. And to herself: "Silly old fool! I don't care. I aren't frightened of you and your nose. What a collar!"

Her reply made no more impression upon the cold gray eye than if it had never been given.

"Who are you?" the old gentleman repeated, with the peremptoriness for a question ignored.

Blanche conceded her name once more in a somewhat higher key—albeit not too high, for there is a certain nakedness about the sound of one's own name when uttered by one's own lips in times of adversity that causes one's own ears to shrink, and leads the lips to be as considerate as possible in their task of inexorable exposure.

Again, with the cold gray eyes fixed upon her, the old gentleman repeated his stern formula:

"Ye'll 'a ti speak . . ." Fondie began in a congested whisper—and would have added "up tiv him a bit, Miss Blanche. 'I misdoot aud gentleman dizn't hear you ower well," but his foot failed him at the crucial moment, and by the time the spasm was over Blanche had already spoken, saying, "BLANCHE BELLWOOD" in her loudest voice to the steel eye, and to herself, "Is *that* loud enough for you? How many more times do you want me to say it. Silly old fool! You *are* a silly old fool. You're worse than father. With your black tie."

This time the cold gray eyes gave indication of an intelligence reached by Blanche's answer.

"Blanche who?"

"BELLWOOD! I shan't say it any more. Go on! Stare! I can stare back."

Her interrogator, having elicited the name, concerned himself no further with it, but passed on without comment to the fresh inquiry:

"What are you doing here?"

This seemed a much more difficult question to satisfy than

the first. Even Fondie wondered what could be the real reply to it, but Blanche promptly held out his week-night cap and said without abashment or hesitation:

"Picking up this."

The old man, sharpening the look of interrogation in his eyes, repeated his question as before, demanding more authoritatively:

"What are you doing here?" and Blanche repeated her answer in a higher tone: "Picking up this!" and to herself, "It's sickening!" And once more Fondie's husky whisper admonished her from the wall: "You'll 'a ti speak up tiv him a bit, Miss Blanche! I misdoot . . ." and would have added the rest if only his boot would have let him. The old man urged her, "Eh?" and for the third time Blanche answered him, extending the explanatory cap so far on this occasion as to look almost as though she were collecting contributions for a hospital. The green tweed headgear thus emphasized caught the cold gray eye and served to distract the glance from Blanche's face. After a prolonged scrutiny the glance seemed to satisfy itself that this was an article of human wear, and the voice demanded:

"Whose cap is that?"

At this, Fondie's sense of chivalry would no longer be denied. The cap was his. Only craven cowardice could consent to allow the Vicar's daughter to be blamed for what did not even belong to her. He hooked for better foothold with his toe, and answered from the wall-top, "It belongs me, sir," at the same moment that Blanche retorted, "John Warkup's cap"—John Warkup's name being as good a name to use as any, to serve a friend.

The conjunction of the two voices was not without effect upon the steel-gray eye. A look of perplexity came into it, as though suddenly aware of some other and intrusive element in the interview. It passed from Blanche's face to the extended cap, and from the cap to the white-faced boy, as though seek-

ing the source of the new disturbance, and from the boy to the wall-top, and found it—as though for the first time—in Fondie, on whose face it concentrated in a gaze of stern and cumulative displeasure.

"What business have you up there? Eh? I say, what business have you up there?"

Fondie's humility prepared itself to answer: "I misdoot you'll say I'se not a deal o' business, sir. And I wean't even presume ti say I'se onny, i' a way o' speaking. I'se humbly sorry ti be found where I is, and put you ti trouble o' rebukin' me. I'se no wish ti mek mysen a nuisance ti onnybody. But I'll ask you, sir, ti be so good as blame me, not young lady. Cap's mine, not hers. She'd screen me if she could, I know."

But the eye afforded him no chance for so much as a tenth part of the explanation. It sharpened to an imperative point before Fondie could recover from the convulsion preparatory to speech—a convulsion all the more violent and protracted through the fact that one of the brotherhood beyond, grown impatient of Fondie's obstinate disregard, sought to attain the summit of the wall, and see what Fondie appeared to be engrossed in seeing, by way of Fondie's legs.

"Get down at once!" The command was accompanied by a gesture of the chalk-white hand that forbade all altercation. "Do you hear? You have no business on that wall. You are trespassing. Get down at once!"

To abandon Blanche now to the wrath that his own indiscretion had served only to intensify seemed in Fondie's mind a dastardly thing to do.

"I'll ask ye, sir . . ." he had begun, with the desperate resolve to supplicate the latent mercy in the stern eye, but he got no further than that, for the old gentleman broke in upon him indignantly:

"How dare you talk to me! I won't listen to you. You are on my wall, sir. Get down immediately, or I will send for the police."

He spoke of police in the plural, though it was only singular in Whivle, as Fondie could have told him; but even without this extra threat the imperative eye and the dismissive forefinger were too emphatic to be ignored. He would have liked, for respectfulness' sake, to have wished the old gentleman "Good evening, sir," before retirement, but the hand and eye forbade. He let himself subside from the summit of the wall without a word, and without care. It would have been a small consolation to his feelings if he could have received some painful and visible injury in his descent, so that he might at least enjoy the comfort of suffering for Blanche's sake, but he fell with all Jarge Amery's Saturday-night luck, unhurt, and the brotherhood closed round him at once to inquire the latest intelligence of Blanche, accusing him: "Thoo's a nice yan! Thoo couldn't speak ti onnybody when thoo was atop o' yon wall. What's ago? Wheer is she?"

Blanche's brother, having cast off the late attitude of morose indifference, was among the inquirers—displaying, it must be confessed, more exultation than concern to learn that Blanche had fallen into the enemy's hands. The unfraternal Bullocky declared: "It sarves her reet. She's ower clever. She thinks she can do owt. She shouldn't 'a said 'What if thoo did!' when I telt her I 'ad done."

Fondie said sadly: "I blame mysen, Master Alick. Fault's mine."

Bullocky, astonished at this startling confession of culpability, demanded: "What way is it yourn?"

Fondie answered: "I'se oldest, Master Alick. It would 'a shown better on my part if I'd stopp'd her fro' climbing wall."

"Thoo stop our Blanche?"

"It would 'a been manlier o' me if I had 'a done, Master Bellwood," Fondie said. "Even at risk o' Miss Blanche's displeasure."

"Thoo couldn't 'a done!" the Bullocky decided, with a sudden championship of his sister's cause. "Diz thoo think oor

Blanche would tek onny notice o' thee? Thoo knaws very well she wouldn't. Thoo wouldn't 'a durst said it if she'd been stood there."

Fondie did not resent the charge. After all, it was true enough. He could do a lot of noble and courageous things when Blanche was not there to see them. He only answered, "Do you think not, Master Alick?" with his humble, inoffensive voice, and made no effort to assert his dignity or teach the Vicar's son more serviceable manners, but picked up the roll of music from its resting-place in the grass at the foot of the wall, and stroked his hatless head.

"There's one thing," he reflected, "which mayhap we may have cause ti be thankful for. I should think they wean't expect Miss Blanche ti clamber back same road as she went. They'll let her oot by front gate."

XXIX

MEANWHILE the interview with Blanche proceeded on the far side of the wall round which the Bullocky and his brotherhood clustered. For a while after Fondie had disappeared submissively from sight the wrathful gray eye continued to fix the spot that his head had once occupied in space, and the stern forefinger still pointed in dismissal, as though to provide against any reappearance on the trespasser's part; which proved how little he could have known of Fondie. Then the imperative hand slowly traveled down again to the old man's side, and the steel-gray eye came back to Blanche—who had during its absence bestowed a sagacious, though fruitless, wink upon the boy—and looked at her with a new intensity; as though, in the interval, it had almost lost sight of her, and had forgotten why she was here, or whose cap it was she held in her hand.

The once keen look betrayed rather fatigue and weariness

than anger; and had to rest upon Blanche's teeth for a moment or two in order to regain its wrath. Perhaps Blanche's teeth helped to restore it to indignation, for by anybody unused to their native candor their frank display might easily be misinterpreted into a smile of effrontery, and the gray eye waxed in sternness as it looked at her, and the old interrogation began anew.

When they had progressed once more as far as John Warkup's cap, the old gentleman asked Blanche *what* business she had in that garden. Eh? What business—and cupping his ear, he held it forward impressively to Blanche, so close that she could note the gray hirsute growth with which it was elaborated—had she in that garden?

As the interview at this rate seemed likely to be endless, the boy—who all the while had stood motionless in the spot where Blanche and the old gentleman had discovered him—ventured at last to interpret Blanche's twice-given answer in his clear, practiced voice to the imperfect ear, saying, "She says 'None,' grandfather."

"Then why is she here?"

"For the cap, grandfather."

"Whose cap?"

"John Warkup's cap."

"How did John Warkup's cap come into the garden? John Warkup's cap has no business in the garden. I won't have John Warkup's cap in the garden. Was that John Warkup on the wall?"

"She says 'No,' grandfather."

"Who was it?"

"She says she does not know, grandfather. She says it was a stranger."

"A stranger? On my wall!" The old gentleman turned his severe attention upon Blanche. He would not have strangers on his wall. He would not have caps in his garden. It was his garden. His property must be respected. He sought

privacy, and would have it. He wished it to be understood. Did she hear? Eh? What? He wanted her to understand, once for all, he would tolerate no caps. No intrusions. Did she understand? Eh? What? She did? He demanded an answer. She did?"

Once more the boy interpreted Blanche's answer to the imperfect ear. "She says she does, grandfather."

"She does? Eh? What?" He turned his eye upon Blanche again. "You do? Well then . . ." So long as she understood, once and for all, it was enough. . . . She was to go. Eh? What? He said she was to go. To take away the cap and go. "And don't let it occur again."

"Am I to go back the same way?" Blanche asked.

"Eh?"

"Am I to go back the same way?" Blanche repeated in her most defiant voice. ("Silly old fool. You are a silly old fool. Eh?")

"I say you are to take your cap and go."

She began once more: "Am I to go back . . ." and broke off with an appeal to the boy. "Tell him, will you? I can't make him hear."

"She says . . ." the boy interpreted, "she says is she to go back the same way, grandfather?"

"The same way? Which way?"

"She says, is she to go back over the wall, grandfather?"

"Over the wall?" He looked at Blanche incredulous of what the ear admitted to his hearing. "Certainly not. I will not allow anybody over the wall. I have told you that already. I forbid you to have anything to do with the wall. Do you hear? Eh? What?"

Blanche appealed to the proprietor of the three romantic names again, asking: "How does he mean me to get out? Ask him, will you? It's no use me trying."

The old gentleman intercepted the sound of a communication addressed to other ears than his own, and broke out as before:

"What? What do you say? What is she saying, Lancelot? I forbid you to talk to her. Take your cap and go at once. You have no business here at all. You are trespassing."

"She wants to know how she is to go out, grandfather?" Lancelot explained to him in his clear voice—a voice to which the old gentleman was evidently well accustomed, for he never questioned it a second time. "Is she to go out by the gate?"

"The gate?" The old man looked at the boy as though the suggestion were too audacious to be entertained, and was plainly on the verge of dismissing it when the relevancy of the request dawned upon his indignation. "The gate is locked," he said petulantly. "It is always locked. You see what trouble and inconvenience you are causing," he added, addressing Blanche. With his gaze still fixed sternly on her rebellious white teeth he began to grope in the side pockets of his tail-coat, one after the other, and produced as the fruit of considerable search a rusty key—the same that Isaac Merfitt had stared at, in the aggregate, by the hour together.

"I will let her out if you like, grandfather," the boy volunteered.

"Certainly not. You are to stay where you are. I forbid you to speak to her. I forbid you to have anything to do with her."

And as the old man, beckoning with the key, turned to lead Blanche out of the shrubbery, she detached the forget-me-not from her belt and bestowed it on the boy in passing. It was by this time a shabby bunch of forget-me-not to be sure, belt-strangled and wall-chafed and bruised—but it came from Blanche, and Fondie Bassiemoor, and scores beside, would have jumped at the chance of it. The boy, however, did not show any marked alacrity to take what Blanche offered him, though his fingers closed over it passively when she pushed it into his hand, whispering: "Meet me some afternoon. Go on. I shall be sat by pond tomorrow. You can whistle of me if you

like. You're not frightened of him, are you! Whistle twice."

There was no time to say more, for the old gentleman—either with a suspicion of some surreptitious interchange of words, or merely to see if Blanche had understood and was following his conductorship—turned his head, and Blanche stepped forward, adjusting her belt. The gaitered feet moved slowly, and the head and shoulders shook slightly with the concussion of each step. Blanche sustained her dignity on a diet of "old fools" that she kept articulating very nearly aloud, with the most emphatic formation of lip. Twice she pulled faces and put out her tongue at the venerable shoulders in front of her. And once she turned on her heel to see if the boy had come out of the shrubbery to watch her departure. He had. Whereat she showed her biggest smile and waved her hand, but Lancelot Griffith D'Arcy Mersham made no response to the signal. Perhaps he did not know how. There is an education in such things. And Blanche had no opportunity to wave again, for by that time they were by the gate, whose padlock the old gentleman unlocked at last.

"You see," he said, "the trouble you are putting me to. The gate is locked. It is always locked. I wish to be undisturbed."

Blanche told herself, "I shan't call with father now. I don't care what he says. He'll have to call with himself." And she hoped, even at the cost of his immortal soul, the old gentleman would never go to church.

XXX

SO Fondie's copy of Dr. Ezra Blenkinson's "Sixty-nine Melodious and Progressive Organ Voluntaries, Compiled for the Use of Beginners and Students of this Esteemed Instrument With or Without Employment of the Pedals," that Fondie had acquired for tenpence and a little palpitation at the

second-hand bookstall in Hunmouth Market (being told by the proprietor that the volume was scarce, and contained every requisite for the equipment of a cathedral organist) and had written his name on—not without misgiving when done, and the modest hope that folk wouldn't misread the signature to mean he laid pretension to play them all—came to no practical good that night, and passers-by lacked occasion to exhort him, "Go it, Fondie! Let her have it. Gie her a good squeezing noo thoo's gotten her i' corner," as they were in the gentle habit of doing. Fondie's aunt, tired of fruitless journeyings to her gate-end to look for her nephew, put back all the things she had displaced in preparation for his coming, one after another: first the crocheted antimacassar on the harmonium top, followed by a trip to the gate-end to see if Fondie's week-night cap and Sixty-nine Organ Voluntaries were visible; and then the china dogs upon the antimacassar, with another journey to the gate-end to see whether such summary procedure had brought the week-night cap and Sixty-nine Voluntaries to their senses; and finding that it had not, returned to the house to put back the vases of nodding grass and dried honesty and straighten the white window-blind as rigid as an upper lip, and stiffen the starched window-curtains to make them express all the reproof of which a human mouth could be capable—so that Fondie and all Whivvle might read he was in disgrace; and removed the pieces of matting laid across the carpet in the fairway to the harmonium for Fondie to tread on; and locked the harmonium and the parlor door, breathing hard to give herself the audible satisfaction of much trouble taken for folk without the grace of gratitude, and assumed a countenance in fitting accord with all these things, greeting her nephew when at last he came, with a sarcastic:

"Nay. It's never thoo. It's somebody else. Thoo's i' bed by this time, I knaw!"

To which Fondie, contributing his mournful and transitory smile, misdoubted—"Aye, he knew. He was humbly sorry.

Time was later than she should be, by rights"—though he made haste to assure his aunt that under the circumstances it was not his intention to trouble her with any of Dr. Ezra Blenkinson's Sixty-nine Voluntaries this evening.

"Nay, that thoo wean't," she said decisively, to let him know she was under no obligation to her nephew's considerateness in this. "I'll watch it. Harmonium's locked up, an' parlor an' all. An' door would 'a been locked beside in a minute. Folk can't be expected ti watch oot o' people over garden gate all night."

Fondie agreed, contritely enough, that people hadn't any right to expect folk to do it, and, smoothing down his hair upon a brow that much haste had made conspicuously humid, confessed he had intended to be earlier.

"Aye! Intended!" his aunt rebuked him with unpleasant directness. "World's full o' folk that intended."

"I did set off i' middlin' good time," Fondie admitted in humble palliation of the misdemeanor, and regretted the admission too late. "But I . . . I was detained," he added contritely.

"Who detained ye?" his aunt asked, and though she asked out of mere feminine curiosity, her eye, to Fondie, assumed a keen and scalpel-like look that made him smooth his hair more actively and more apologetically than before. "Who detained ye?"

Fondie was debating in his own mind whether it would be of the nature of a falsehood to say that several folk had detained him, and was almost on the point of thinking that it wouldn't—if only he could persuade his organs of speech to think the same—when his aunt repeated her question. In repetition it sounded so much more peremptory than before that Fondie's organs of speech could only articulate the truth, and while the inward, thinking, or devilish part of him (as he was wont to regard it) still formulated words of equivocation, his lips replied apologetically that Miss Bellwood had detained him. The

intelligence turned his aunt's look of inquiry into a gaze of disgust.

"Yon lass!" she said. "At your age! I thought you'd 'a had more sense." And added the terrible question, "Where-aboots did she detain ye?"

Once more the Devil, speaking through Fondie's spiritual organs, prompted him to say, "I' my feythur's yard. She cam' about hymns for Sunday." But his organs of speech would only articulate according to the dictates of an absurd and dogmatic truth, replying that she had detained him "i' no particular spot ti speak on, as ye mud say, aunt."

"What? Ye mean you've been walkin' oot wi' lass?" his aunt demanded.

Fondie strove to remove an imputation so derogatory to the Vicar's daughter, saying:

"Not i' sense you mean, aunt. I'se jealous Miss Blanche would look higher than syke as me. She wouldn't be very well suited wi' idea, I misdoot." To which his aunt, piqued by this assumption of superiority in favor of so infirm a goddess, retorted sharply:

"Why shouldn't she be suited? She's suited wi' a deal less. It's for you ti be suited, not her." And after telling her nephew he ought to think more of himself than be seen in such company, and preaching him a lesson on what was due to his dignity and pride, reverted to the feminine part of her nature once again, and asked with apparent casualness:

"Wheer a' ye been, two o' ye?"

Fondie answered: "Not si far. Nobbut across fields."

"Across fields? Which fields?"

"Why, I didn't tek that notice, aunt. We went by choch field, an' cam' roond . . ." his lips nearly betrayed him with the words "by aud house," but he steered them forcibly clear of the danger and, skipping this perilous locality by a prodigious effort of articulation, completed the circuit with " . . . back by lane-away."

"Which lane-away?"

"Green Lane, aunt."

"Diz thoo mean Lovers' Lane?"

"Why . . . there's some folk calls it that," Fondie confessed with a blush.

"Green Lane! What! Has it taen ye till noo ti walk round there?" his aunt protested, and the peculiarly feminine portion of her asked: "What were ye doin' wi' yoursens all while?"

Fondie, who realized the difficulty of canceling the entire episode at the aud hoose and replacing its evacuated space with incident satisfactory to keenly analytic inquirers like his aunt, misdooted they hadn't been doin' a deal to speak on, like.

"Mebbe summut thoo wouldn't care ti speak on at all," his aunt said sternly, suppressing for the nonce the feminine portion of her.

"We didn't walk oot o' course fast," Fondie explained.

"Nay, I could 'a knawn that mysen," his aunt said grimly. "Yon lass wouldn't let ye." For in her day it was said she had not been without discreet admirers, and at least twice had been known to look at poppies over a cornfield gate in company. With the acquisition of years she had lost all sense of allegiance to her sex, and held no opinion at all (or worse) of the modern young woman. And though she did not go so far as to say of gates what some extremists say of public parks, that they are a danger to the young, she not infrequently wished them far enough, and said they were all some lasses could think of. Her mind turning by a stern reversion to Blanche's generally audacious raiment, she asked Fondie with abrupt severity:

"What stockings had she on?"

The sudden question and the associations it revived brought the blood to Fondie's face in a flush of recollection and embarrassment, taxing his refractory organs of speech to their uttermost:

"I should be sorry ti think I'd taen onny notice, aunt," he

said, twisting his cap. "A's sure [I'm sure] I never gied 'em a look."

"Hod your noise!" his aunt commanded him impatiently. "Don't try an' mek me believe. She dizn't put 'em on for syke as me. They'd be yon last new pair, I'll awander. What's Vicar doin' on ti let her wear syke thinks. Aud man's fond—and thoo's fond an' all," she said, reverting to the more contemptuous second person singular for the more complete expression of her scorn. "Come thy ways in wi' thee and set thysen doon ti table. I'se no patience wi' thee. I thought thoo'd more sense."

With which she led Fondie into the kitchen and pointed him to his accustomed chair, and put food on his plate in a manner expressive of elderly reproof, mixing hospitality with censure, and censure with feminine interrogation. "Cut thysen some cake. A nice idea me spending every bit o' night ower yon gate, expectin' thee, an' thoo walkin' oot parson lass. My wod! I mud a' spared mysen trouble an' all. What did ye talk aboot, two o' ye? Fine nonsense, I'll be boon. Did thoo set her all way back ti vicarage? My wod, thoo hadn't need. What? Thoo didn't. Why didn't thoo? Where did thoo leave her, then? Carrier's? Aye, I mud a' knawn. So she could gan back an' tell her feythur she'd been wi' Ada all neet, an' him fond enough ti believe it."

XXXI

THE junior occupant of the old house and proprietor of the three romantic names did not seize the first available opportunity of accepting Blanche's invitation to the vicarage pond. She sat there on two consecutive afternoons in her blue print dress and the patent-leather-tipped shoes that had earned her father's disapprobation as being far too frivolous and showy for a vicar's daughter, plucking automatically at the

grass within reach as she read, and biting as much of it as would have served the vicarage pony for breakfast. But no Lancelot Griffith D'Arcy Mersham came, and Blanche had to make believe she had never expected him and didn't want him, and had only gone to the pond because Whivvle was sickening, and she wasn't going to stay indoors of an afternoon to please him, whatever he said. And she didn't care—and wasn't frightened.

Nevertheless, the exploit at the old house seemed to have stirred its occupants from their former seclusion and brought them into the light of day. The old gentleman and the young displayed themselves to the eye of Whivvle on several occasions, once beneath the broad noonday sun, and they even studied Deacon Smeddy's bow-shaped windows that protrude portentously into the main street on each side of the door.

From the Deacon's bow-windows the newcomers passed slowly down the high street. The old gentleman, wearing a gray high-crowned hat that was solemnized with a broad black band, and the drab gaiters in which he had appeared before Blanche, walked in the deeply meditative manner of old age. He carried the left hand behind his back, as though for spinal support, and his eyes, fixed keenly upon the roadway, seemed to peruse matters of grave moment writ in the Whivvle dust.

The boy, accommodating his footsteps to the pace of his companion, compensated for this corporeal idleness enforced upon him, by increased activity of his eyes. From side to side of the High Street they roamed; from the scoured doorsteps to the bedroom windows, and thence to the red tiles and chimneys and down again. Last of all, outside the wheelwright's yard, he stayed his grandfather by the sleeve and, indicating Fondie's masterpiece in all its splendor of gilt and shading, exclaimed: "Here we are, grandfather. This is it."

The intelligence aroused the old gentleman from his reverie. He stopped of a sudden and asked:

"What does it say?"

"It says: 'J. BASSIEMOOR & SON, SMITHS, WHEELWRIGHTS, CARPENTERS, AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENT MAKERS, UNDERTAKERS; and 'ETC.'"

The sound of the uplifted voice, reciting from the signboard as though the words were a lesson in divinity, reached Fondie's ears—for he was no more than a few paces distant, beyond the yard-end, stooping with his father and Smith Humblesides, Jun., and Jarge Amery (not that the latter was party to the work of inspection, or even particularly welcome in the wheelwright's eyes, having ignored all the wheelwright's invitations to betake himself elsewhere: "Has thoo no wark o' thy awn, but thoo mun watch other people?") over a grass-reaper that Smith Humbleside, had driven into the yard but a few moments ago.

Under more propitious circumstances he would have greeted the callers with a respectful good day, but to do this—as things were—Fondie felt would have been presumptuous and vain. He held the grease-cup in his hands and waited.

XXXII

FOR a long while—a whole century in Fondie's chronology—the old gentleman gazed at him with that keen and penetrative look before which Fondie's head had subsided from the wall-top; and in the gaze (though Fondie freed his eyes from it after the first dread impact) its victim read a stern denunciation growing toward speech. One troubled glance at the young gentleman, too, told Fondie that his identity and association with the Blanchean episode were established beyond a doubt. It only needed another moment and the troubled better part in Fondie's nature would have acknowledged its guilt, misdooting that it knew, sadly too well, what the visitors were about, and he accepted the blame, and cap had been his, and it was him and not John Warkup that had been fixed on wall-top—but the old gentleman drew his hand

across his brow and down over the hatchet-shaped nose, and asked if he understood pumps.

The question was so utterly unexpected, and so remote from what Fondie's tormented conscience had been prepared, or rather unprepared, to meet, that for a few moments he had no reply to it—the only words in his mouth at the time being words of humility and contrition, with which he was as much taken at a disadvantage as if they had been a mouthful of bun. It was not, indeed, until he heard his parent apostrophise his speechlessness with subdued wrath, "Noo then! Canst speak? How mich longer diz thoo mean ti stand? Thoo's gotten a tongue. Tell him aye. Pumps? Aye. Thoo's fittled plenty," that Fondie was able to swallow the obstructive words of repentance and substitute others more appropriate to the occasion, saying he misdooted he couldn't lay claim ti understand 'em i' strict way o' speaking (sir), but he'd fittled up a few i' village noo and again—while Fondie's father muttered in his beard from behind for the benefit of Fondie's hearing: "Pumps? What's thoo talkin' aboot? If thoo dizn't understand 'em by this time, who diz? Tell him thoo understands 'em. Diz thoo want ti send onnybody away?" And to the twain that bore him company by the reaper, through the fibers of his beard: "Lad's fond. Pumps! He's fittled all there is aboot spot! He's fittled scores."

Fortunately Fondie's modest misgiving fell short of the aged ear. The old gentleman sharpened his gaze on Fondie's countenance to a degree of keen and terrible identification, as though next moment he must inevitably denounce him, but the increased keenness of vision only accompanied the inquiry:

"Eh! What's that? What do you say?" which encouraged the wheelwright to raise his voice in turn from behind, for Fondie's reproof and sharp instruction, crying: "Noo then! Dost hear? Say aye, thoo diz an' all."

Such a direct form of answer was foreign to Fondie, who invariably based his assurance of all things personal to himself

on a pious doubt; saying he wouldn't promise to mek owt like a job on it, but maybe there'd be no harm in his trying, and onnyways he'd do his best if they wished him to. But prompted by the parental wrath, he contributed an obedient—albeit spasmodic—"Aye," to which, immediately, he added a respectful "sir," and further modified in accordance with the imperative demands of his native modesty by saying, "I'se mended an odd pump or two i' village, noo an' again," and undid himself by the further supplement, "Though maybe it's not what syke a gentleman as yourself mud call mending, sir, for all pump drew fair and well at finish."

Though the swordlike eye seemed embedded to the hilt in the very substance of what Fondie said, and the old gentleman appeared to make more use of this disconcerting organ for aural purposes than his ear itself, it is doubtful if he gathered much from Fondie's speech beyond the mere fact of a general acquiescence.

"You know where I live?" he said abruptly at the conclusion, and Fondie's blood came helter-skelter up again into his forehead. Twice he twisted the workaday cap contritely and answered, with all the air for a confession:

"I misdoot I do, sir." But the old gentleman allowed no opportunity for any more explicit repentance. Gathering from Fondie's face that the answer was in the affirmative, he asked him when he could undertake the work. "At once, eh? At once?"

"If my feythur could see his way ti spare me, sir," Fondie modestly suggested, for he still preserved the pious and filial fiction of being an apprentice and subordinate to his father's rule.

"Spare thee?" the wheelwright muttered contemptuously in his beard, from the rear. "Aye! An' welcome! Thoo's lartle use at yam" [little use at home].

Thus indirectly assured of his father's sanction, Fondie was able to express his willingness to undertake the requisite work

at the visitor's convenience, and indeed offered to go then and there to the old house—a proposal that caused the wheelwright to mutter with fine inconsequence, "Aye! That's way an' all! When thoo knaws this reaper's stood at back-side o' thee, and 'aif a dozen more jobs aboot spot, waiting ti be done."

But the old gentleman, when he had elicited the nature of Fondie's proposal, shook his head upon it, saying, No, he did not wish that. The gate was locked. It would be inconvenient. This afternoon would be more suitable. Yes. This afternoon would be more suitable. This afternoon . . .

With that the glance concentrated upon Fondie, passed right through the back of his head, through the wheelwright, the reaper, Smith Humblesides, Jarge Amery, and the horses beyond, and seemed to reach the extremity of space, where it tranquilized and came to rest—being only disturbed when the boy, after a sidelong look at the old gentleman's countenance, laid his finger on his coat sleeve and said (though very gently): "Grandfather . . ."

The old gentleman started slightly with the familiar "Eh? What? What are you saying?" and drew his hand awakingly over his face, asking his grandson after a moment, "What else was there, Lancelot?"

The grandson gave first a glance at Fondie, then lowered his eyes, as though applying his mind to some task of remembrance.

"Eh? What? What else was there?" the old gentleman demanded. "There was something else. I know there was. Something else I meant to do. What was it?"

Again the boy flicked a look through his lashes at Fondie, more the impulse of a look, to be sure, than the look itself.

The old gentleman readjusted his hold of the walking-stick and tapped the ground impatiently with the end of it, saying, "Stupid! Stupid! I can't trust my memory. I can't trust my memory any longer," when he stopped with a sudden "Ah! . . . The wall. I knew there was something. The wall!"

It seemed to Fondie that the young gentleman's eyes sought his for a brief moment as though to assure him, "It is not my doing. I did not tell him. He has remembered for himself."

"I want," the old gentleman continued, with a resumption of the dread sharp gaze, ". . . I want some glass put on the wall. Sharp, broken glass, set in mortar. Eh? You understand? It is a high wall. . . . I say it is a high wall. You understand?" Each time he said "Eh?" he did so with the apparent belief that Fondie had spoken, and made a renewed thrust at him with the terrible swordlike eye. "People are in the habit of climbing on it. Most tiresome and annoying. I say they are in the habit of climbing on it. There was an impudent fellow the other night. I won't allow it. I won't submit to it. The wall is meant for privacy. Eh? I say for privacy. I will not have my . . . What? Eh? Who? . . . I will not have my privacy disturbed. Some glass and mortar. Strong, sharp glass and plenty of it, and good thick mortar. You understand? Can you do that for me? Eh? What does he say, Lancelot?"

But for the peremptory nature of the concluding inquiry, Fondie's conscience had decided that there was now nothing left for an honest conscience but confession. He had already moistened his lips twice for the purpose, and got as far as "I misdoot, sir . . ." in his contritest voice, when the wheelwright broke in upon his intention, saying, "Thoo misdoots? . . . Why, thoo diz nowt else. There's nowt thoo dizzn't misdoot."

"I misdoot," Fondie said, swallowing his original intention with a gulp, "I misdoot it's more of a bricklayer's job, sir."

"And thoo's a bricklayer!" the voice of the wheelwright reminded him fiercely from behind, in what the elder Bassie-moor deemed to be an undertone—and that served indeed all practical purposes of an undertone so far as the elder visitor was concerned. "Thoo's as mich a bricklayer as onnybody

else i' spot. Thoo's as mich a bricklayer as Tom Clegg when he's sober."

"Eh? What do you say? Can you do it?"

"Can thoo do it? Say aye, thoo can. Thoo'll 'a ti do it," the wheelwright's voice commanded him, and Fondie told the terrible eye without looking at it, that if a roughish job mud be acceptable, he'd try and gie satisfaction, adding, "I'se jealous my feythur's ower mich confidence i' my ability."

"Who's confidence i' thy ability?" the implacable wheelwright growled from behind. "Not me."

But the old gentleman's hearing caught no vestige of this sinister by-play, which indeed would have eluded any but a trained Whivle ear. Even Lancelot Griffith D'Arcy—though conscious that some other voice than Fondie's was taking stern part in the proceedings—was unable to discover the source or significance of it. He only discovered, at some distance to the rear of Fondie's deferential face, a short, thick-set aged man, wrapped in the longest and thickest of yellow-white beards from neck to knees, as though it were an apron; with a brown asterisk where his mouth should be, and brows like birds' nests; who stood with the immobility of a tree-stump on his two stout legs. Nor did he suspect for a moment that the gleaming eyes visible beneath and partly through the wheelwright's jutty, fibrous brows resented his magnetic scrutiny, and that the voice of undiscoverable origin apostrophized him: "That's it. Stare. Aye. It's Joe Bassiemoor. Tho'll knaw him again next time thoo sees him." For so engrossed had he become in the task of trying to trace the voice to its source, and to discover where the human identity of the wheelwright rested—since every attempt to penetrate this portion of his being was repulsed by an impregnable wall of hair—that he did not notice at first his grandfather's departure, and was still gazing at the fascinating figure of the Whivle wheelwright when the old gentleman had already moved down the yard. Then, blushing confusedly to find his attention rendered so manifest, he withdrew his eyes

with an apologetic start and turned them hurriedly to Fondie, saying "Good morning." And since Fondie's gaze was at that moment upon the receding shoulders of the old gentleman in his progress out of the yard, he repeated his "Good morning" almost immediately, as though inviting a reply, and the face addressed to Fondie, despite its shyness, seemed very friendly.

"Aye! . . . I beg your pardon," Fondie exclaimed, grown suddenly aware of the response expected of him. "Good morning, sir. I misdoot my manners had strayed a mawment." The young gentleman said "Good morning" again, to signify cheerful forgiveness, and Fondie reciprocated the compliment—which caused the wheelwright to ejaculate sarcastically through his beard: "There's a deal o' good mornings knocking about, seeming. It'll suit farmers. Noo then, fushn'eed! How mich longer diz thoo mean ti stand starin' at yard-end?"

XXXIII

DULY after dinner—which, according to custom, he partook of in his shirt-sleeves; the difference between the seasons being marked by the fact that in summer the sleeves were rolled up from the forearm and in winter not—Fondie presented himself before the wheelwright with his work-bass over his shoulder, and said:

"If there's nothing else ye want me for, feythur, I thought I'd gan noo."

To which the wheelwright, whose memory was no better than other men's of his own generation, said:

"Wheer tiv?"

"Tiv aud hoose, feythur," Fondie explained. "Aboot yon pump. You'll maybe remember aud gentleman comin' inti yard this morning."

"Aye!" said the wheelwright. "Tho'll gan onnywheres on' do owt sooner nor stop wheer wark is."

"Why . . ." said Fondie, in response to his parent's present displeasure, "I'se not tiv a few minutes, feythur, if there's owt I can help ye wi'."

The wheelwright said tersely:

"Gan thy ways."

So Fondie gave a hitch to the bass and went his ways, thereby meeting Blanche. Blanche does not properly come into this chapter, but it is hard to exclude Blanche's spacious smile, which brought him up on his heel as effectually as Grindle's dog does the postman now and again, for all the brandishing of the postman's stick.

"Now don't forget!" Blanche admonished Fondie. "If you see him, think on and tell him I shall be sat again pond while three. No, while half-past. No, I'll give him while a quarter to four. If he's not there by then I shall go home. I shall go home across the fields, tell him. . . . I was going round to church if I hadn't met you. I promised somebody this morning I would. I don't care. Let them whistle."

Fondie, with his pained attenuated smile, ventured modestly to suggest that perhaps if Miss Blanche had promised . . .

"Shut up, Fondie!" said Blanche. "I know what you're going to say. I shan't. So there. I didn't promise them faithful, I only promised. . . . Stop a minute. Give him this. Say Blanche sent it. Say with her love. No, don't say that. Yes, you can. No, don't. At least, you can say just what you like. I don't care."

The "this" in question was a sprig of candytuft that had accompanied a sanguine temperament all the way from the other side of Beeminster on a bicycle, and Fondie took it with his customary misgiving, saying he wouldn't like to gan so far as ti promise, since he wasn't even sure if he'd so much as catch sight of the young gentleman.

"Oh, shut up!" said Blanche, with fine intolerance. "That's just like you, Fondie. You never want to do anything I ask you. You're as bad as father. I'd sooner ask him."

Fondie's lips twisted to a strange shape with the desire to say, "There's not many things I wouldn't do for you, Miss Blanche," but the articulation of this unpracticed sentence was more than they could manage, and they relapsed upon the more familiar and respectful formula, "I'll try my best."

"That's what you always say," Blanche charged him ungratefully, her opulent smile being like all other forms of opulence, singularly unmindful of past favors; and he conceded humbly that his best, as Miss Blanche justly remarked, was not much to boast of, but still . . .

And would have consigned the candytuft mournfully to his work-bass if Blanche had not deterred him in time.

"Why . . . I thought maybe it would be better oot o' sight," Fondie explained. "Cap lining would a' been a likelier spot for it, I know, but it cam' inti my head I mud 'a ti lift cap ti aud gentleman."

"Who cares for him!" Blanche exclaimed unceremoniously. "I don't. He's a silly old fool. That's all he is. Put it in your coat so as you won't forget it."

The command, emanating from Blanche, acquired an authority almost equal to the dictates of Fondie's conscience, which believed that a flower in the buttonhole was not seemly in the employed, nor respectful to the employer, and he was about to suggest the thought to Blanche with due deference, when Blanche said: "Come here, let's have you"—and pulling him toward her by the coat with one hand, fitted the flower summarily in his buttonhole with the other.

"There! That'll do. Now don't forget. I shall ask you if you did, next time I see you."

The act only took a single moment to accomplish, but it left Fondie out of breath, and he resumed his journey to the old house blowing sighs that, properly applied, would have filled a collection of the grandest soap-bubbles. Only for Blanche's sake would he have breathed like that and worn the white candytuft in his coat, and it needed all his loyalty to Blanche

to make his modesty endure the big white bridal rosette that mocked him. The Devil, indeed, said, "Tek it oot. She'll niver know!" but Fondie answered, "Would ye 'a me betray confidence Vicar's daughter's reposed i' me? It's coward's counsel." And he frustrated the Devil's hand (which coincided with his own left) when already it had traveled as far as the buttonhole.

That the old gentleman's memory was still active in some of its phases was proved by the fact of Fondie's finding him at the gate with a spindle grasped in each hand, and his hatchet nose over the top rail between the cast-iron *fleurs-de-lis* in an evident attitude of expectancy. The keen gray eye pierced Fondie's conscience through the bunch of candytuft like a rapier, and caused him to realize sadly that the Devil's would have been the easier way, and that the better qualities of conscience were hard to practice and costly to maintain. As the padlock was still visible on the gate, Fondie—after lifting his cap and experiencing some difficulty in replacing it with one hand (the other being occupied with the bass), and ultimately holding it—inquired, in a voice that his underrating modesty deemed loud enough to be respectful, if the old gentleman wished him to enter by the front gate.

"Eh? The gate? Certainly not. Can't you see the gate's locked?" The old gentleman made an authoritative and circuitous gesture with one hand, and said, "Go round. Eh? What do you say? I say, go round."

This was not a particularly auspicious overture for a self-conscious modesty with too much candytuft in its buttonhole, but Fondie deepened the look of respectful humility on his face to act as antidote, and went round to the side-door in the eight-foot wall that the old gentleman's hand had appeared to indicate. In the olden days, when the vicarage supported two maid-servants, this side-door was reputed to have been a bit of a goer, but it had taken no part in worldly affairs, or pride in its personal appearance, these ten years past, being so over-

hung with ivy that Whivvle had almost forgotten its existence until Fondie recalled it to remembrance with his paint-pot, and lubricated the latch for Mrs. Marfitt's use. Here, after waiting some while listening to the sound of a key inexpertly applied, the door opened and the old gentleman, having first made sure of Fondie, beckoned him forward with a curt crook of his forefinger through an opening just liberal enough to admit Fondie and the work-bass sideways, beginning to shut the door again the moment Fondie's head showed through, with the air of one not accustomed to consider inferior conveniences, and, turning the key in the lock once more, led Fondie, without a word, to the back regions of the house, where, in the small paved courtyard before the kitchen window, he pointed his finger at the pump which Fondie knew full well in coming would be the pump he had to mend.

"Diz she sype, sir?" he asked respectfully, standing in as deferential a posture before the pump as if she had been the old gentleman's daughter, not presuming to take any liberties with her person until requested. At the third time of asking, the old gentleman caught the word for which Fondie's vocabulary held no available equivalent, and repeated "Sype?" in a voice of petulance and suspicion.

"'Sype'? I don't know what you mean. How do I know what the matter is? Are you a plumber?"

Fondie misdooted he wasn't exactly a plumber i' strict way o' speaking, though he did plumbing jobs for a deal o' people. But if he might be allowed just to try sweep [handle] a time or two. . . . Aye! Sweep was fit ti pull him off his legs (sir). He was jealous there mud be foul air i' pipe. He wouldn't like ti say for certain (sir), but he was jealous it was (sir).

The old gentleman, lending a visage of corrugated intensity to an explanation of which not one word was intelligible, and which might have been (for anything his hearing told him to the contrary) a dissertation on Confucius in Chinese—except that Fondie held the pump-handle with one hand and respect-

fully pointed to some internal portion of her anatomy with the other—brought the issue to its essential by asking: "Can you mend it? Eh? What?"

Without venturing to express quite such a dogmatic affirmation, Fondie undertook to do the best in his power if that would be agreeable, and the old gentleman, bidding him get to work and make all the haste he could, left him to invoke the pump on one knee, in an attitude suggestive of grand opera and high tenors, except that Fondie's instrument of declaration was a screwdriver, and not a voice.

XXXIV

AND here, engaged in the work of unscrewing the pump's wooden casing with as much delicacy as if it had been a corset, he was visited shortly afterwards by the boy, who made his appearance noiselessly at the kitchen door, and had been intently studying the nape of Fondie's neck for a couple of minutes or more before Fondie awoke to the consciousness of being looked at from behind. The sight of the young gentleman, silent and observant in the doorway, plunged him in embarrassment, and caused his ears to ring violently with Blanche's emphatic injunction: "Tell him. Don't forget. I shall ask you if you did, next time I see you." But he had the presence of mind to cough politely and lay down his screwdriver, and raise his week-night cap (not the cap he had worn in the yard this morning, but the green tweed cap of the evening before) and say, "Good afternoon, sir."

The young gentleman's response to this was an uplifted forefinger and a conspiratorial "Shhh!" softly protracted.

"Good afternoon," he said immediately afterwards, in a voice so discreetly lowered as to be first cousin to a whisper. "Don't talk loud. I'm supposed not to be here. I'm supposed to be . . . to be doing something—working."

There being no particular response to this in immediate view on the horizon of Fondie's wisdom, he sat back upon his boot-heels and stropped the screwdriver submissively on the palm of his left hand. It came into his mind as he sat there that he seemed predestined to be entangled in compromises not his own, and that it was hard to lead the honest life and preserve the purity of a conscience if one yielded at the same time to the sin of obliging one's friends.

"I'se ower weak," Fondie admitted sorrowfully to himself. "I'se not ti trist to. Aud gentleman mud pop roond corner at onny minute, and then where would my character be?"

And in a desperate splurge to reclaim a character already jeopardized and lead the higher life according to his lights, he found strength to take the screwdriver in the right hand of determination and tell the boy:

"I misdoot ye'd best not converse wi' me, sir."

The modesty expressed by this counsel visibly excited the young gentleman's curiosity. He examined Fondie with a closer and more attentive interest, asking at length:

"Why not?"

"I'se jealous it dizzn't meet wi' aud gentleman's approval, sir," Fondie said.

The avowal brought a blush to the young gentleman's cheek. For awhile he looked at Fondie's countenance with eyes that admitted a truth too stubborn to be denied, and then, without making any answer, disappeared all at once from the doorway.

Fondie believed he had gone for good, actuated by the sound sense of the advice just given. Whereat the Devil, or Fondie's own conscience (in the humble twilight of introspection Fondie could scarce tell which, virtue and vice being such perplexing and indistinguishable twins) rose up immediately to upbraid him, and had already said, "What! Was it thoo that promised Blanche Bellwood thoo'd do thy best? And what did Vicar's daughter say? Thoo didn't like it at time, but what else diz thoo deserve? Thoo thinks more of thy character, that's as

bad as it can be at onny time, than thoo diz o' Vicar's daughter. Aye, thoo's a vartuous yan, thoo is, Fondie Bassiemoor. What'll thoo tell her when thoo meets her noo, an' all, and she asks thee what thoo did?"—when the young gentleman suddenly reappeared at the doorway with a look of some exultation on his face, and exclaimed (though still in a voice subdued to caution):

"It's all right. He's on the garden seat. Perhaps he may fall asleep. Sometimes he does after lunch. Now I can watch you. I want to see how you mend a pump."

With that he came and stood close behind Fondie, and the Devil (or Fondie's conscience again—one or the other) jogged the elbow of the arm that operated the screwdriver, saying: "Noo then, Fondie Bassiemoor! Diz thoo mean ti be a man?"

"Aye, I do," said Fondie, and after misdooting that there would be very little to see, he took the candytuft from his buttonhole and offered it to the young gentleman.

"I trust you wean't be offended, sir," he supplicated in a troubled undertone, "but I promised somebody I'd give ye this."

For a moment the boy seemed too much taken by surprise to accept his unexpected offering, then with an exclamation of gratitude he hastened to take it from Fondie's hand.

"How good of you."

"It's not i' onny ways my own goodness, sir," Fondie was quick to explain. "You're very welcome for what bit of sarvice I'se done i' bringing it. And I was to tell ye . . ."—his voice proved a little unsteady beneath the strain of this difficult and deliberate message— ". . . that somebody would be sat waiting o' ye while half-past three this afternoon, again pond. I should 'a said while a quarter ti four. And if you don't chance to see them by then, they'll be walking home across fields, I was to tell ye, sir."

With that he picked up the screwdriver again, and made pretence to set to work once more out of a delicate desire to be

no intrusive witness of any confusion that his words might cause.

The boy, who had sought to express his appreciation of the bunch of flagging candytuft by holding it alternately before his eyes and nostrils—not that it had now very much to offer the sense of either sight or smell—inquired curiously:

“Which pond?”

“Pond aback o’ vicarage, sir,” Fondie answered. “I’ vicarage paddock, betwixt vicarage and Baulk Lane.”

“Who is ‘somebody’?”

“I thought maybe,” Fondie shyly insinuated, “you mud be aware who somebody was wi’oot me naming her.”

The employment of the feminine pronoun brought an inquiring light over the boy’s face.

“Do you mean the girl who climbed over the wall? After John Warkup’s cap?” Adding for further identification, as though any were needed, “With the big teeth?”

Sobered by this direct reference to Blanche’s person that his own lips held sacrosanct, Fondie misdooted respectfully that he had not noticed the teeth. The young gentleman insisted:

“Surely you must have done. She is smiling with them the whole time. And her eyes—they are nearly sky-blue.”

Fondie answered humbly, “Are they, sir?” as though the grandson of the tenant of the old house had communicated some piece of knowledge to which his own imperfect education was a stranger. “I’s scarcelins presumed to notice what color they were.”

The boy did not prosecute the subject of Blanche’s person further but said, after a curious perusal of Fondie’s sunburnt neck, “Why has she sent me this flower?” And as Fondie delayed his answer in an endeavor to decide how best Blanche’s message might be mitigated and made presentable, the young gentleman continued: “She gave me one the other night. I don’t know why. I dropped it in the shrubbery. It was very nearly dead.”

Fondie, having been spared the first qualm of explanation in regard to Miss Blanche's conduct, found strength to surmise that her act on both occasions was one of kindness.

"And what does she want me to go to the pond for?" the young gentleman demanded. "She invited me to go the other night."

"I couldn't say for certain, sir," Fondie answered at length with fine discretion. "Miss Blanche didn't think ti tell me. Very like she wishes ti converse wi' ye, sir."

"What about?"

"I misdoot I couldn't presume ti answer that, sir," Fondie said. "Maybe aboot a variety o' subjects agreeable ti ye both."

The young gentleman applied the bunch of candytuft to his nose again, as though by its aid to gain some clearer knowledge of the identity and purpose of the sender.

"I can't go to the pond," he said; and Fondie responded:

"Indeed, sir. You'll know best i' what way to dispose o' your time." And he found sufficient confidence to add, on Blanche's behalf, "It'll be a disappointment ti young lady, sir, if I may venture ti say so. She's very anxious ti mek your acquaintance, I know."

"Really?" There was no doubting the interest in the young gentleman's eyes. "Who is she?"

Fondie told him with reverence in his voice that the young lady was the daughter of the Vicar, and was thought a deal of by everybody i' that part o' the country.

"What made her climb over the wall?" asked the young gentleman.

A bewildering assortment of answers to this question was displayed for Fondie's choice by Conscience, or his obliging friend the Devil, these two individuals masquerading so freely in each other's guise that Fondie had increasing difficulty to know with which of them, particularly in a crisis, he had affair.

"To fetch my cap, sir," he answered after a pause; this being, he remembered, the reply that Blanche had given to the old gentleman, and no departure from it—for any honorable man, Christian or unchristian—being now possible.

"But she threw the cap over the wall herself!" the young gentleman returned. "I saw her."

The statement admitted of small denial.

"I beg ye wean't think onnything again her on that account," Fondie besought his interlocutor. "It wasn't done for badness, sir. It was nothing ni more nor a bit of fun. She's a young lady that dizn't always stop ti consider consequences."

"How is her leg?" asked the young gentleman of a sudden. So incredible a reference to this proscribed and sacred member brought the blood of embarrassment to Fondie's brow, and made him disbelieve his own hearing.

"Her what, sir?" he inquired. "I misdoot I wasn't paying attention I should a' done, time you was speaking."

"Her leg," repeated the young gentleman, without the least reflection or perception of Fondie's embarrassment—the latter accentuated by remembrance of his overnight discourse with his aunt.

"I didn't know anything was amiss with it, sir," he answered, after a pause. "She was walking on it this afternoon. It seemed i' good enough fittle—so far as onnybody could judge wi'oot setting theirsens oot ti tek notice. But maybe it's stockings you're alluding to, sir."

"Did she hurt those too?" the young gentleman inquired. "She hurt her leg getting over the wall. Just here." He indicated the place on his own knee. "It was all red and bleeding."

Fondie blinked as though smoke were in his eyes.

"I'se sorry ti hear young lady happened anything," he said. "But she never mentioned it to me, sir. Why, it's not likely she would."

The young gentleman traveled an inquiring eye over Fondie

for a moment or two, as though he were disposed to ask, "Why not?" but the question that Fondie half apprehended did not follow. Instead he told Fondie, "I recognized you at once this morning. I was frightened he would, too. Your name is John Warkup, isn't it?"

Fondie, with a sorrowful smile, said he misdooted that wasn't his proper name.

"But that's the cap," said the young gentleman, pointing at it with the candytuft. "And she said it was John Warkup's cap. Wasn't it true?"

"Name's true enough, sir," Fondie answered, trying hard to square Blanche's mendacity with some standard of truth. "There *is* a John Warkup. Why, there's two John Warkups as a matter of fact, sir. There's aud gentleman and all. But neither on em's me, sir."

"Why did she say the cap was John Warkup's?"

"I misdoot she did it to screen me frev aud gentleman's displeasure," Fondie submitted. "Not that I desarved it. Fault was mine, not hers. But Miss Blanche would do onnything ti save onnybody fro' onnything, sir."

"Blanche?" the young gentleman repeated. "Is her name really Blanche?"

Fondie hastened with visible relief to assure the young gentleman that there was no equivocation lurking behind this name.

"Miss Blanche Bellwood, sir."

"And what's your name?" asked the young gentleman.

Fondie answered: "It's name you read off signboard at yard-end this morning, sir."

The young gentleman asked, "Bassiemoor?" and Fondie misdooted that it was.

"J. BASSIEMOOR AND SON . . ." the young gentleman recited, with his eye as though fixed on a visionary board. "I suppose you are the son?"

Fondie misdooted he was, though not so good a son as he might have wished to be.

"And the old man with the long, yellow beard?" asked the young gentleman. "Who was that? Was that J. BASSIEMOOR, your father?"

Fondie said, "Yes, sir," and paid a filial tribute to his father's virtues. The young gentleman's chief admiration was directed to J. BASSIEMOOR's beard. He inquired if Fondie's initial was also J, and Fondie informed him it was E. "E for Enos, sir."

"But folks generally calls me 'Fondie' in common parlance," Fondie said, to which the young gentleman exclaimed:

"Of course! She said, 'You *are* a silly fool, Fondie,' the other night, didn't she?" and after saying "Fondie" to himself, remarked that he preferred Fondie to Enos as a name. "Fondie's a nice name."

Its owner did not immediately make any acknowledgment of the compliment, but after a pause misdocted humbly that it was "maybe not such a nice name as ye mud be inclined ti think, sir"; and when the young gentleman asked, "Why not?" explained its origin. The young gentleman, undeterred by an explanation so derogatory to the name's significance, said at the conclusion:

"I don't care. I like the name. I think it's a nice name."

"It's not amiss, sir," Fondie conceded. "And I isn't grumblin' at it. It sarves as well as another, and I misdoot it's as good as I'se warth."

XXXV

ALL this while Fondie was not idle. After the first few moments of deferential inactivity, paid out of respect to the young gentleman's presence, he reapplied himself apologetically to work, lending to the young gentleman his ear, and to the pump his eye, and winning the young gentleman's admiration by the rapidity and precision of his movements. Also, the conversation did not proceed strictly according to the

order here described; it was punctuated by inquiries on the young gentleman's part as to the use of this tool or of the other, which his exploring eye discovered in the depths of Fondie's bass, and which his eager hand laid hold of with a marked degree of prehensile satisfaction. In regard to all things touching his many crafts, Fondie's tongue, though it lost none of its modesty, and misdocted its ability to make the meaning of a matter plain, acquired a curious faculty of elucidation. Thus, he explained the principle and practice of pumps, the fashion and utility of valves; and the young gentleman listened to Fondie's modest dissertation on these things, hidden and intricate, with a delicate and slightly open mouth—not so far open, to be sure, as to hint at a wandering intelligence, but to express a very present and admiring one; saying at the conclusion of Fondie's exegesis: "What a lot of things you know!" and betraying even amusement at Fondie's humble, heartfelt disclaimer: "I misdoct it's nought by comparison wi' things I don't know, sir."

Before his wondering eyes Fondie uncoupled the sweep from the plunger-rod, and was about to unveil the absorbing mysteries of the pump-barrel, having removed all the copper bolts but one, when he became suddenly conscious of light and space where the young gentleman's head had been, and, looking round to discover the cause of it, met the glance of the old gentleman, which his own glance dropped as promptly as his hand would have dropped a red-hot poker. The eye, after seeming to challenge Fondie's, rested with terrible intentness on the buttonhole of Fondie's coat, devoid now of the floral decoration that had been so conspicuous a part of it; and for some moments Fondie held an anxious colloquy with the Devil. This time Fondie felt sure it was the Devil and not his own conscience, because the Devil gave such unanswerable advice. "You can't betray the Vicar's daughter," said the Devil; "nor you can't betray your employer's grandson. If he asks 'What's got it?' say 'What's got what, sir?' And if he says 'Flowers,'

say 'What flowers?' And if he says 'I' your buttonhole . . . ' say 'I humbly misdoot you're mistaen, sir. I'se not i' habit o' wearing flowers i' my buttonhole at onny time.'"

But no such catechism put Fondie's virtue to the test, and he was nearly able to make his conscience believe that he would have spoken the truth had it been demanded of him. After scrutinizing the work and asking if it were not yet done, and thrusting his eye through Fondie and the pump in several places, he bade Fondie follow him once more, and preceded the very cap that Blanche had held out for his inspection to the very spot where it had been thrown over the wall, there explaining anew his grievances and his requirements. And the Devil in Fondie was so touched to be made the recipient of confidences grossly undeserved that he fell, and tempted Fondie to fall with him, saying: "Tell him! Tell him! Tell him now. Before it is too late." To which Conscience objected: "For shame! Think o' your father! Think what's owing tiv his gray hairs." But the Devil was so insistent and spoke with so loud a voice that Fondie trod Conscience and his father and the respect due to his parent's gray hairs underfoot, and a voice came out of the lowermost depths of his stomach, declaring: "I misdoot, sir, there's something I ought ti acquaint you with. It was me, sir, you ordered doon fro' top o' wall yon night. I shouldn't like ti tek advantage o' your confidence i' onny way, sir."

The voice, being diabolically inspired, was, of course, far more intelligible than any conscientious voice of purely human origin could be. It reached the old gentleman's ear, and pierced his understanding with the directness of an arrow shot at a mark.

"Now," said Conscience, in the stillness that followed, "thoo's done it! Mek ready to pack thy bass and gan thy ways, for he'll order thee off place and bid thee ne'er come gain hand it onny more."

And even the Devil, shocked at his own audacity, was dumb.

"Why do you tell me that?" It was a stern voice that asked the question.

"I misdoot it's only fair ti let you know, sir," Fondie answered. "John Warkup's i' no way to blame, sir. Cap was mine, sir; not his. I should be sorry ti enjoy onnybody's confidence that I hadn't deserved."

"Is that your only reason for telling me this? Eh? What?"

Fondie answered: "I hope so, sir."

He answered "I hope so" because the emphatic affirmative seemed false according to the canons of protesting Conscience. Even as he eased his bosom of the disquieting burden, Conscience rose up and reproached him, saying in its most contemptuous and scathing vernacular: "Aye! Thoo's a truthful one, thoo is, Fondie Bassiemoor! Thoo dizzn't want ti enjoy onnybody's confidence that thoo hasn't deserved. Tell aud gentleman aboot sprig o' candytuft thoo's gien his grandson, and talk thoo's had wi' young gentleman i' kitchen-yard, an' message thoo gied him fro' Vicar's daughter. Tell aud gentleman that an' all. Half truth's nea better than a lie."

By the light of this terrible and ruthless exposure, Fondie hoped that the old gentleman would bid him "Take your bass and go. Eh? What? I say, take your bass and go." But the eye, instead of growing in severity, to Fondie's surprise and to his Conscience' regret, visibly relaxed. Little creases multiplied all round it, that seemed to be the minute constituents and molecules of a smile. The lips even came apart, and offered the momentary sight of teeth remarkably well preserved. The voice, when it made itself heard at last, pronounced nothing more dreadful than, "You seem an honest fellow. If you hadn't told me, I should never have known. Make the wall-top so sharp that you're not tempted to sit on it again. Eh? What? I say, make the wall-top so sharp that you're not tempted to sit on it again. Can I rely on you? Eh? What?"

Fondie said, almost with fervor, that he hoped the old

gentleman could. The smile faded, and Fondie was dismissed back to the pump with a brief gesture. Both pump and wall were completed on Fondie's part without any further sight of the boy.

XXXVI

THE conception of Saturday as a day of semi-rest for wheelwrights and the sons of wheelwrights was still in its infancy, being by Fondie's parent regarded with as stern an eye as all other childhood. Ideas have this in common with men, that they are rebellious in youth and tyrannous in old age; possessing, like humanity, the desire to live forever and to be respected—after their period of utility is over—for their gray hairs.

So society suffers the incubus of a host of superannuated concepts that cry "Hush!" and "Hod thy noise," as Fondie's father would silence a disputative bairn, and by reason of their antiquity are obeyed, albeit with the secret tongue put out at them by rebels like Blanche. Never having enjoyed a day's illness or a day's holiday in his life, Joe Bassiemoor denied these privileges to a younger generation, and would as soon have given sympathy to sufferers as ha'pence to a tramp; sickness and pleasure being but modes of indolence, which was the only disease the ruthless wheelwright acknowledged.

"Headache!" he would exclaim. "What's that? There was no syke things as headache i' *my* days!" His cure for it was "wark," or "a good crack across lugs."

Nevertheless, the decadent spirit of the age, by avoiding the wheelwright's yard and shop on a Saturday afternoon, compelled him to respect in practice the holiday that he denounced in theory, and left him little to do but move about the yard among the deserted shavings, saying he couldn't get away; not him; and if other folk had his wark to do they'd stop at

yam. Yet he chid those clients who brought grist to the mill on Saturday afternoon by asking them if there wasn't other days i' the week beside this, when they knew him to be shorthanded; and rebuked equally those who delayed the necessary job till Monday on the plea that they had thought "thoo wadn't be working, Joe," by the stern inquiry: "When did thoo know me to do awt else? Nobbut thoo'd had a bit o' sense thoo'd 'a brought job o' Saturday when I wasn't so throng."

On the Saturday succeeding his call to the old house Fondie decided to spend a peaceful afternoon at the organ and improve his mind.

For the playing of church organs the day was perfect. The sky was blue, the sunlight rich as honey; the blackbirds' voices turned to syrup as they sang, dropping with thick and sleepy sweetness from the trees and hedge-tops. In its tree-cinctured hollow the church rippled with the hot and fragrant evaporation from the ripening grass that rose up nearly to its windows, and hid all but the higher tombstones in an untidy sea of fox-tail and cock's-foot, rank chervil, and the gross cow-parsnip—the time-honored perquisite of the vicarial pony, almost ripe and ready for the scythe. Up about the gray tower the daws were garrulous, and larks glimmered in the sky like jewels. Fondie, walking waist-high through the fat churchyard grass with "Dr. Ezra Blenkinson's Sixty-nine Melodious and Progressive Organ Voluntaries, Compiled for the Use of Beginners and Students of this Esteemed Instrument, With or Without Employment of the Pedals (with a Supplementary Appendix touching the Judicious Choice and Manipulation of the Stops)" under his arm, was stirred to vague and disquiet aspirations by the beauty of the world that he misdooted he understood too little; vague aspirations to make himself—however humbly—in some way worthy of it; to justify in some direction (he knew not which) the life that the Great High Giver had confided to him. All his life long Fondie had been

possessed of this foolish sensitiveness to beauty, without knowing in what beauty consisted, and dimly disquieted by the conviction that there was, somewhere in the universe of knowledge, a key to it; and that had he but the learning that he lacked, he might procure admission into that lovely better world from which now his ignorance excluded him. Often in earlier years had the wheelwright's hand aroused him violently from a reverie with his mouth open and his eyes vacant, and wrung from him the penitent confession:

"I misdoot I was ower deep i' contemplation o' yon beautiful cloud, feythur!" or "I desearve rebuke, feythur. I was more throng wi' yon thrush singing than wi' my wark."

"What's thoo got ti do wi' clouds?" the wheelwright would demand—or "thrush," as the case might be. "I'll gie thee clouds"—or thrush"! "Thoo's as mich wark as thoo can manage i' this yard, wi'oot bothering wi' owt else."

The idea that the world held anything out of the compass of sheer utility to justify man's attention had no place in the wheelwright's head. Hence he had never regarded music as a recreation but as an accessory to worship; and worship he had never conceded as a means of giving pleasure to the Almighty, but as an expedient for attracting His attention and letting Him know His worshippers were busy here below. To take joy in the fragrance of a flower would have been, in Joe Bassie-moor's contemptuous opinion, a pleasure merely meet for women-folk with nothing better to do. To read books, similarly, for the mere joy of them, was an extravagance for the opulent and a vice of the idle. "Diz books larn thee to handle spokeshave better?" he demanded of Fondie, and Fondie misdooted with concern that they didn't.

Had Fondie not been unutterably fond, the discipline and stern example of such a righteous father might have made a man of him. As it was, he kept his soul alive on secret aspirations that were almost powerful enough to be real stomach-aches when they came upon him in moments of solitude.

Music stirred him, he knew not how or why; books, too, haunted him with the desire to read them—to taste of the sweetness of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and to be wise. And beauty, whether of Blanche or of a bird, of sunset or moonrise, of stars or blossoms, troubled him with a sweet sickness; a pining of the soul to be something other and something better than he was. When the last rays of the sinking sun set fire to the shavings in his father's workshop and turned each spider's web in the bull's-eye window-panes into magic nets and filigrees of gold, Fondie's yearnings rose like night mists, obliterating the more familiar features of his own being and filling him with the hazy blindness of 'inexpressible desire. The memory of Blanche's face that his modesty rarely looked at fired him to ridiculous ambitions; ambitions to do something worthy of her, and for her sake; remote and impracticable things, such as to play the organ well enough to take the service at Beeminster, or to make himself proficient in his own language, and to master sufficient of the dead tongues to be capable of reading mural epitaphs in hiccuping Latin—attainments which his sober reason told him would be lost upon the Vicar's daughter, who derided knowledge as acutely as her worshipper sighed for it.

Aspirations are reasons gone divinely mad; filled with frenzy and force enough to overcome the logic that would resist them. Thus Fondie's aspirations contained and cherished the most unreasonable of all elements, to wit, Blanche. When he played better than his best, it was to Blanche his aspirations played—albeit his common sense told him she hated organs and saw no merit in the hands that played them. And when he passed through the churchyard, or sat before the pedals in the dimness of the chancel, his soul seemed comforted—however unconsciously—with a sense of Blanche's presence. For him the Vicar's daughter was incorporated in the very fabric of the church. Its stones and pillars, its pews and windows and very hassocks exhaled the living essence of her; and when the sun

burst out of a sudden in volume of glorious gold, and swelled the nave and lifted the roof, and enlarged the church to twice the size it had been, the sanctified sunlight shone in Fondie's vision with more than a resemblance to Blanche's hair, and the beams that fused the pillars to the whiteness of alabaster were of one substance with Blanche's smile.

XXXVII

FONDIE found Blanche's brother seated on the Warkup ledger by the church porch, whittling the Y-shaped half of a catapult.

"Thoo's late!" he apostrophized Fondie, still whittling away at what he held, and sending the whittles with the force of projectiles into Fondie's eyes. "I'se been set here sin' two o'clock," and declared he would have gone in another minute, though that was unlikely, since the new catapult depended for its elastic on Fondie's payment for his blowing of the organ. Fondie, making modest reference to the bulky three-and-elevenpence-ha'penny watch that fattened his vest pocket, ventured to suggest that Master Alick had maybe miscalculated the time. He made it (said he) no more than a minute turned the hour appointed. And church clock (look ye, sir) said about same. But the Bullocky expressed himself superior to three-and-elevenpence-ha'penny watches and church clocks.

"I'se been set here 'aif an hour," he said obstinately, "and it was before two when I left yam. It'll 'a to come off blawin'."

Fondie declared himself to be very willing that it should.

"I'se no wish to tek advantage of ye, Master Alick," said he.

"I'll watch thoo dizn't," the Bullocky ungraciously averred. "Gie us hod o' penny."

As soon as the coin had changed hands—not for the better—and been bestowed in a pocket that bulged with nameless

personality: "Lend us another penny an' all, Fondie Bassie-moor," the Bullocky said, in a voice between menace and persuasion, "while next week. I promised to get summut for oor lass wi' it," he explained. And concluded with the threat: "I wean't blaw for thee nobbut thoo diz."

Any other than Fondie, under such conditions of provocation and blank brigandage, would have dislodged the Bullocky from his complacent seat on the Warkup ledger by means of the nearest ear and booted him gently into a better frame of mind. But Fondie had no proper spirit; no fitting self-respect. His passion for Blanche had absorbed these qualities from him utterly. He merely said, "I misdoot I'se doing wrong, Master Alick," and parted with the second penny as placidly as the first; and even with a third when, encouraged by success, the Bullocky made him "mek it threepence, Fondie, and I'll blaw for thee as long as thoo likes, for nowt, Saturday after next."

Having done this, and admonished Fondie emphatically to "think on, noo, that's threepence," the Bullocky betrayed no immediate anxiety to enter the sacred precincts and assume the functions of a blower, but reverted industriously to his whittling, as though the episode of payment had put him behind-hand with his work and precious time must now be made up. This weapon completed (as he proudly explained to Fondie) a set of six—all carried upon his person, and most elegantly and precisely graded for every description of game. From his waistcoat pocket he produced the bijou, church or parlor catapult—a delicate weapon of the size of a forefinger—carved out of cedarwood from a cigar-box begged from the proprietor of the White Cow, and furnished with fine elastic purloined from half a yard of pale blue material destined for Blanche's new suspenders. From various other districts of his person he produced in turn the rakish-looking weapon for use upon larks and singing birds, and the mighty engine of destruction for ground game, chimney-pots, and telegraph-insulators, that expedited a stone of the size of a hen's egg with the velocity of a

meteor. This implement, of fourfold plaited elastic, was the object of his special pride, since it had once brought a hesitating rabbit to earth, and being inspired to a shooting spirit by the mere display of it, he leaped from his place on the Warkup ledger and, after coursing like a harrier over the church path with his nose to ground in quest of a serviceable pebble, he bade Fondie "See ye!" and took a prodigious shot skyward at the church daws. The missile—shaving the shooter's cheek so close as to leave a whiplash weal upon it—struck the stonework of the tower with a gratifying crack, scattering the garrulous daws that rose in noisy circles and floated restless and protesting round the finials. Fondie, relieved to have the demonstration bloodless, remarked, after a discreet lapse of silence that might be deemed either admiration or its opposite, and would indeed have been the latter for anybody but the sacred brother of Blanche:

"I'll be getting choch-door open. Maybe you'll follow after awhile, Master Alick. I don't want ti hurry ye."

The sacred brother made a sound in his mouth that was as ambiguous as Fondie's silence had been, and, restoring the engine of destruction to his pocket, took up the discarded knife and resumed his whittling, asking Fondie the cryptic and somewhat suggestive question:

"What diz thoo want ti play orgin for?"

As he was still seated upon the Warkup tomb when Fondie exchanged the outer sunlight for the church's inner gloom—seemingly absorbed in his work to the exclusion of all else—Fondie did him the injustice of supposing that he did not intend to follow. The suspicion was unfounded, for subsequently Blanche's brother sauntered through the little southern door cut out of the great one, and up the aisle to the American organ in the chancel, whittling all the way. But his heart was plainly not upon the windy work in store. To shape an instrument of destructive precision and to satisfy the insatiable requirements of an organ's lungs is a task meet for more than one pair of

hands. Time and time again the breath went out of Dr. Ezra Blenkinson's dismal voluntaries with a convulsive wail, and the blower, caught at a disadvantage, begged Fondie "Hod on a bit. I'll gie thee a blaw in a minute"—and then, thrusting the knife between his teeth, laid hold of the unrigid lever with a murderous gesture and gorged the bellows till they groaned again and the very organ trembled with this apoplectic super-pressure. Last of all, the work of whittling being completed, and nothing lacking to the efficiency of the weapon but the elastic that Fondie's coppers were to buy, the Bullocky cried with an effrontery that would have been shameless in any but Blanche's brother:

"Noo, then! This is last go. So thoo knaws. Thoo mun mek best on her. I'se gien thee aboon an hour, Fondie."

With that, throwing himself into the conclusive work with such violence that the organ rocked like a ship at sea, the Bullocky took his leave without any further notification to the victim of this base desertion.

XXXVIII

THE death-rattle sounded in the throat of Dr. Ezra Blenkinson's ninth voluntary (*Andante Religioso* and *Cantabile*) before the footsteps of its murderer had passed out of the church. Fondie, turning his head in the direction of the nave, with his hands upon the console, still grasping the chord of the music's untimely demise, saw the vivid ingress of white sunlight from the outer world and heard the clatter of the iron latch. For awhile he sat, tasting the new quality of absolute loneliness, and then shook himself from the reverie that a silent church induces, misdooting "this is not road ti better mysen, hooiver!" and applied himself to the diligent practice of the dumb pedals.

Immersed thus in the depths of this absorbing occupation,

with his shoulders arched and his chin embedded in his chest, and his eyes fixed upon alternate toe and heel in their slow progression, he was not all at once aware that his solitude had been disturbed; but engrossed in the action of his extremities, and wrapped in a silence broken only by the muffled thudding of the pedals and his own voice (affirming religiously the name of the note played: C, C sharp, E flat, G), he awoke with an exclamation to the consciousness of a countenance at close quarters, watching him.

"My wod! Ye gied me a start!"

Then, realizing almost in the same breath who his visitor was, he apologized contritely for this disrespectful surprise.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I misdoot I was ower deep engrossed to notice you come in."

The young gentleman of the old house said promptly: "No. It was my fault. I'm sorry I startled you. Perhaps I have no right to come in here. Do you mind?"

"It's not a matter o' me minding, sir," said Fondie, whom such unwonted deference to his feelings took by surprise. "Choch is as mich yours as mine. You're very welcome so far as I'se consarned, and I know Vicar'd say same if he was here. It's a pity he wasn't here an' all," he added. "He could 'a shown ye roond, then, and explained inscriptions." It came as a further surprise to Fondie's modesty to learn that his visitor had been led into the church by no thirst for inscriptions, but by the sound of the music alone. He had been listening beneath the east window, he confided, until the music stopped; and then, drawn by curiosity to know the source of it, had come round to the porch.

"A boy was just leaving it," he explained. "He was whistling. He did not see me. But I knew by that that the door must be open. It is not always open. It was not open the other afternoon."

And then, turning his gray eye from Fondie to the organ, and from the organ back again to Fondie, as though to estab-

lish the association between them, expressed his surprise to find Fondie where he was.

"I didn't think it would be you," he said. "I did not know you could play. You never told me. How clever of you."

The look of admiration that he poured upon Fondie in saying this made Fondie blush to find himself the sudden recipient of such unmerited praise.

"I misdoot there's not mich cleverness i' me, sir," he declared, speaking with the subdued and reverential voice for his own imperfections and the edifice he sat in. "I only wish there was. I wish for warship's sake I mud play a deal better than I do. If I'd any cleverness about me, I ought ti play better an' all, time I'se been at it."

"I can't play at all," his visitor admitted, with a certain wistfulness in the confession. "Besides . . . you *are* clever. Look how you took the pump to pieces and put it all together again. I could never have done that."

"Why, as for pump, sir," Fondie modestly explained, "pump's in a manner o' speaking my trade. I'se used ti pumps, or should be. I'se been brought up among 'em all my life. And a man ought ti reckon ti understand syke jobs as he's paid for, sir—though I misdoot there's some that dizzn't." He seized the opportunity to inquire after the pump's health. "Diz she still run off at all, sir?"—expressing keen satisfaction to learn (after the question had been repeated in a form more intelligible to the young gentleman) that she did not, and that he had made what in the vernacular was described as "a job on her."

But though Fondie's mastery of the pump had commanded his visitor's admiration in the first place, it was to the music and the more intellectual side of Fondie's nature that the young gentleman's interest attached now. To the obloquy and derision of his beloved instrument—the instrument that lent to his ambition a voice, and an expression (however stammering) to his dearest dreams—Fondie had grown by hard experience

habited; but never till now had he seen the organ gazed at with eyes of sympathy and veneration, or stood in company with one whose interest in it furnished the least counterpart to his own. Blanche flashed at it a smile of candid scorn. Blanche's brother, when he blew for Fondie and was not engaged in independent manufacture, carved initials and profane emblems on it, and demoniac heads that vied with gargoyles for hideousness, and usurped most of the breath that Fondie's music needed. Even the best-intentioned spoke of Fondie and his organ in terms of indulgent disrespect, calling the latter his "calf" and bidding him "mek her blare!" But the gray eyes of the young gentleman of the old house displayed not the slightest inclination to laughter or any phase of friendly contempt, asking questions in the soberest spirit of inquiry. What (for instance) had Fondie been doing when the young gentleman first observed him? And why was he so attentive to his feet? The pedals? Which were the pedals? Then if Fondie were playing the pedals, why did they make no sound? Because there was no wind? But why was there no wind? The blower had had to go away? Oh, was that the boy he had noticed going over the stile? How did one blow an organ? By the handle at the back? Like this? Might he be permitted to blow, for instance? And if he blew, would Fondie play something for him? The visitor, with eagerness in his young gray eyes, begged that Fondie would.

"I misdoot, sir," Fondie replied, with a sudden access of humility, ". . . I misdoot that blowin's ower rough work for your soft hands. And I'se jealous I should be doing wrong ti let you blow orgin for such as me. Aud gentleman wouldn't be very well suited."

The boy looked into Fondie's face for awhile as though he would like to deny the force of this argument of disparity, but the desire faded into a constrained and reluctant admission.

"I know he wouldn't. Nothing suits him. He wouldn't let

me be here if he knew. He's gone to Hunmouth, and won't be back till tea-time." There was a note of rebellion in the young gentleman's voice underlying these statements of fact. "He won't let me do anything. He won't let me make friends with anybody."

He relapsed into silence and fixed his eyes upon the oak truss of the console, fingering the brown woodwork mechanically with his hand. It was plain to see that his thoughts moved onward still with him across a tract of memories and unspoken discontent. Had Fondie been some people, and possessed their curiosity and wisdom, he might have made profitable use of this opportunity to widen the breach in his victim's discontent, and, insinuating entrance while the gates of the owner's mind stood ajar, obtained a peep into the secret and mysterious life beyond. But Fondie was imbued with no such laudable ambition. All his life long he had been obsessed with the absurd belief that other people's business—save in such respect as it drew upon his sympathy and practical assistance—did not concern him. True to his character, therefore, Fondie laid no ingenious fuel on the young gentleman's mood, whose blaze might have lighted up some matters at the moment dark, but adopted the foolish and pacific course, and remarked when at last the silence seemed to demand some form of acknowledgment from him:

"Maybe he acts for t' best, sir. He's an aud gentleman wi' years upon his shoulders. Very like he has reasons of his own, that's wiser than folk mud think 'em."

"I know what his reasons are," said the boy. But he did not disclose them. Perhaps he was waiting for Fondie to put the question, but if so he did not know Fondie. Fondie did not even encourage him by a judicious silence, but responded with almost precipitate humility:

"It's not for syke as me ti inquire into 'em, sir."

"I love music," the young gentleman continued. An observer more acute than Fondie would have seen that the state-

ment did not represent the strict continuity of his thoughts, and that some intermediate part of his thinking had been suffered to lapse in silence. "But he won't let me learn. He says it isn't manly."

The point of view was not altogether strange to Fondie. Among his own acquaintances were many who looked upon the art with the intolerance for a purely feminine attainment, such as bread-making or needlework, and could not understand his choice of such an instrument as a harmonium.

"He says it isn't manly." Fondie's visitor repeated the old gentleman's dictum as though by way of comment on the injustice of it. There was no pronounced resentment in the voice, but the hand still traced and retraced the curves and angles of the truss, and his brows were knitted in the work of deep and rapid thinking.

"Why," said the pacific Fondie, "I know there's some dizzn't hold music i' mich esteem. It's not what ye may call an active occupation, sir. I've heard some folk say music was only for idle fellows that couldn't bide ti wark. Maybe aud gentleman thinks it wouldn't gie you a deal of exercise. It's close sitting, at times, I'll agree."

"Do books and writing give exercise?" the young gentleman demanded. "And sitting at a table, copying . . ." his tongue stopped obviously on the brink of declaring the matter to be copied, and revised the sentence's conclusion, ". . . copying things?"

Fondie admitted, "Why, one mud think not a deal, sir." But he made the suggestion, "Aud gentleman thinks, maybe, music isn't suitable for syke as you that hasn't any need ti wark for their living. He thinks maybe there's other studies more desarving of attention."

"What studies?" inquired the boy.

"Why, it wouldn't beseem me ti name 'em, sir," said Fondie, "even if I possessed ability. There's some things gentlefolk is larned to do, and others things they're larned not to do, but

I expect you'll know what they are a deal better than me, that's been brought up all my life among workin' people."

The boy said, "I know . . ." and continued the rest of his reflection in silence. "I get tired of being a gentleman!" he confided on a sudden, ". . . and of having no friends and no games, and nobody to speak to but him. He says my own pride ought to sustain me. I ought not to wish to associate . . ." he paused, and then blurted out the words in his mind—"with people beneath me."

"Onnybody can see he's a thorough gentleman," Fondie subscribed considerably. "Way he walks, and way he puts his hand tiv his ear, is enough for them that has any idea what a gentleman should be. He's an aud gentleman anybody mud be proud on if he belonged tiv 'em."

The boy exclaimed impulsively:

"I wish he belonged to *you*."

"To me, sir?"

"Yes. I envy *you*."

"*Me*, sir?" Fondie said again, with incredulous surprise, and the sad smile oozed out of him and disappeared after its brief and wonted manner. "I misdoot there's not a deal ti envy about me."

"At least you can do what you like," the young gentleman said. "You can please yourself."

"Why, self's last person to please, sir," Fondie answered diplomatically. "And as for doing what I like, I'se jealous there's not many things I like a deal after I'se once gotten 'em done. Anybody can discarn a better way o' doing anything than them that diz 'em."

"But you can come here," the boy persisted, "and you can play music. Nobody stops you."

"It's true nobody stops me, sir," Fondie conceded. "Maybe for my own sake it would be as well if anybody did, and kept me to work I'se better qualified to perform. I misdoot music's beyond me. I mud as lieve seek ti mek mysen inti a gentleman."

I can see folly o' that, well enough, and maybe wi' time I shall see folly o' the other. Sometimes I think I'se seeking ti play for love o' music, and sometimes I misdoot it's ti please my pride. You'll maybe ask, 'What pride?' sir—and I'se jealous there's very little that properly belongs me. So long as I don't look for it ower keen I can make mysen think it's there, but moment I set mysen to fin' oot what it's made of, there's naught to see. All I can find is ignorance and imperfections, and a wish ti be better than I deserve to be. Preacher was right, I think, when he said, 'All is vanity.' You'll understand, sir," he added hastily, "I'se not applying anything o' this to you."

XXXIX

ALL the while that Fondie spoke, his eyes held conscientiously aloof from the young gentleman's face as though they did not presume to approach even the threshold of his vision—more especially since he was aware the vision rested on him, and that the young gentleman from the old house had him under close and curious scrutiny. But it was not the sort of scrutiny that brought, as Blanche's did, embarrassment upon his words. It was the sort of scrutiny before which the modest element in him seemed rather to find tongue and feel singularly encouraged and competent to speak. His fresh-shaved chin was very smooth and round; and his cheek very clean; and his modestly averted eye full of honest gentleness; and his lips as candid as they could be. He might have stood, without embellishment, for the personification of Truth; save that Truth figures as a poor friend-maker, and that the eyes of the young gentleman grew in interest and friendliness as Truth's delegate proceeded.

"I like you," he said at last, as though the tribute of appreciation already visible in his gray eyes could be held back from his lips no longer. "I don't know why, but I do."

To a soul unused to compliments or flattery such a tribute was disturbing. Fondie flushed to the roots of his brown hair, and it was he now who stroked the console of the organ.

"I misdoot there's little to like about me, sir," he said evasively. "I'se fresh to ye, maybe. You wouldn't say same if you knowed me better."

The young gentleman did not argue this question of the validity of his judgment, but surprised Fondie still further with the impulsive request:

"Teach me how to play."

Many considerations and objections rose anxiously into Fondie's mind, but he chose at last—after a silence during which the young gentleman kept close watch on the external process of his thoughts—the answer that lay closest to his own humility, saying:

"I misdoot, sir, you've formed ower-high an estimate o' my skill. It's not for the syke as me ti instruct anybody. Them shouldn't teach that's never been taught."

"Have you never been taught?" the young gentleman inquired.

Fondie answered, "Not what you'd call 'taught,' sir," and was disconcerted to hear his virtues extolled.

"That proves you all the cleverer."

"Why, I'se jealous there's not mich cleverness," Fondie objected respectfully, "in doing things one way that ought, very like, ti be done another; wi'oot knowing for certain whether they're right or wrong. An' if one's wrong ti start wi', it's no matter about doing one's best. Best only meks warse on it. Bad habits dizn't grow inti good by practicing 'em, sir. There's books ti larn ye, I know, but books cost money. They're not for syke as me, and it's not always that syke as me can understand 'em."

"Perhaps I could help you," the boy suggested. "We could help one another."

The suggestion, humbly acknowledged, tended to deepen the

look of unworthiness that sat on Fondie's forehead. An appropriate reply was so difficult to formulate and so long in coming that the young gentleman had time to prompt him with the question, "Couldn't we?"

"We could, sir," Fondie admitted dubiously at last. "Leastways, I know *you* could, sir, if our positions was different fro' be what they are. But I'se jealous I oughtn't ti encourage you, sir, if I did what I should do by rights."

"Why not?" inquired the boy. "Because of him?"

"I'll admit he was in my mind," Fondie acknowledged.

"Are you frightened of him?"

"Not exactly frightened, sir," Fondie answered, "i' sense o' being frightened."

"You helped *her*," the boy reminded him, "over the wall. You'd do things for her. I know you would. You brought me her message—and the flower. You knew he wouldn't like that. And you knew he wouldn't like you speaking to me, or me speaking to you, for you said so—and you kept looking round all the time."

"I can't deny it," Fondie confessed. "I can only regret it."

"Do you regret it?"

"I misdoot I *ought* ti regret it, sir," Fondie answered. "I try to regret it. It seems least I can do. It seems least anybody can do when they've done onnything they know they shouldn't 'a done."

For a while the young gentleman was silent, looking at Fondie as though suffering these last words to sink deep into his understanding.

"I don't regret it," he declared promptly and resolutely after awhile. "I suppose I ought to, but I don't. It's no good pretending. I've got tired of being obedient always. Nothing comes of it. I mean to be disobedient sometimes—like her. She's disobedient. She says so. I was talking to her the other afternoon. Perhaps she told you?"

"I'se fit ti think she named it, sir," Fondie modestly avowed, albeit Blanche had done much more than that.

"I was standing by the gate," his visitor continued, "when she came by. She had a book in her hand. She lent it me. I have it here." He dipped his hand for a moment into the breast pocket of his coat and brought out a familiar, shabby, and much-rolled *Sunday Sacred*, reciting the title "'Lord Ronald's Crime; or, The Lost Heir of Weirchester.' Have you read it?"

"I'se fit ti think I know name, sir," Fondie said, "and yon spot-mark on cover. I'se seed Miss Blanche wi' it in her hand a time or two, but it's not one she ever lent me."

"It's awfully good," the young gentleman assured Fondie, with a gleam of enthusiasm. "Particularly that part where they shot him. I'm glad they did. I was reading the book in bed this morning. I wish it had been longer. But there is a sequel: 'The Missing Will; or, Vengeance is Mine, saith the Lord, I Will Repay.' I shall get Blanche to lend me that." He restored the thumbed and flabby novelette to his breast pocket, reverting to its lender. "She wanted me to go for a walk with her, but I couldn't. She wanted to know why not. And when I told her he was in the garden she said: 'Well, what if he is? You can slip out before he comes. I aren't frightened of him. Are you?' When I told her he had forbidden me to go out, she said: 'What if he has? Father's told me the same. If I'd taken any notice of what he told me I should be sat at home now. He's always telling me. It's sickening. I hadn't need do everything he tells me to, or I should never do anything or get out at all.' She said: 'Come along while you've got the chance. Don't be a coward. What can he do at you if you do?' I said I didn't know. 'Why, he can't do anything,' she told me, '. . . except talk, like father does, and tell you not to do it again. He's all talk. I don't care. I aren't frightened of talk. Talk doesn't hurt anybody.' And after she'd gone I thought of her and you, and wished I had done as she asked

me. I've thought of you both ever since that first night. Lots of times. Why can't I have friends, like other people?"

"Why, maybe you could, sir," Fondie consoled him, "... nobbut they was suitable ti your station."

"I don't care whether they're suitable to my station or not. Any friends are better than none at all," the young gentleman contended. "I've never had any. He won't let me. *He* talks to people; why mayn't I? What harm is there in my talking to you?"

"One would think not a deal, sir," Fondie subscribed. "But aud gentleman's maybe jealous to keep you oot o' bad habits, and fro' picking up speech fro' syke as me that wouldn't beseem ye. 'Evil communications corrupt good manners,' as Book rightfully informs us. I know my speech is imperfect; there's a deal o' things I say that's not according ti rule. It's been a trouble ti me many a time, when I'se wanted ti speak a word and not known how, or ti express mysen and not known way. I'se been fit ti blame my feythur, noo and again, that he didn't think fit ti gie me a bit more larning. But maybe, if he had 'a done, I shouldn't 'a made much better use on it. And I'se thought this, too; that I mud vally it all the more for not having it. It's way wi' folk, I know, sir. They think a deal more o' things they haven't got than of things that belongs 'em. I'se always had a desire to larn and mek myself better than I really is, though I'se not so sure, after all, there's any merit i' that, sir. An' maybe we're better as we are, if we only knew it. An' then again, I'se never made use o' syke advantages as I had. I misdoot that's way wi' me. There's lots of things I could 'a got ti know and perfect mysen in, nobbut I'd asked Vicar or put question ti Schoolmaster, but I never did. It was always: 'I wean't trouble him ti-day; I'll ask 'em next time,' wi' me."

He misdooted it was a bad trait, and that the quality would lead him nowhere, since it ran through all his undertakings. For further illustrations of which he adduced the organ yonder.

"This organ?" asked the young gentleman, for Fondie's eye seemed directed far away into the honeyed dimness of the church.

"Not this organ, sir," Fondie explained. "Organ up i' loft yonder. Far end o' nave."

Following the direction of Fondie's eye, the boy gazed along with him at the ancient structure of grained wood and decorated pipe that rose out of the gallery beneath the tower.

"What! There are two organs here! Do you play the big one on Sundays?"

"She hasn't sounded this twenty years, sir," Fondie answered. "Not i' my time, at least."

The boy asked, "Why not?"

"She's ower mich decayed, sir," Fondie informed him. "Them that had charge of her didn't look after her as they should. Roof fell in once, i' my feythur's time; rain poured doon intiv her all through winter and fore-end. Why, I believe they covered her up best way they could wi' a stack-sheet, but damage had been done then. They mended roof and said organ mun wait awhile, and she's been waiting ever since."

"Why?"

"Because she'd cost ower-mich money ti fittle her, sir. There's been talk of hodding a bazaar a time or two, but then, as Vicar says, what's use o' sinking money ower an organ wi' nobody ti play her—and choch fabric calling for repair and all. But I'se sometimes had idea I'd like ti try and mend her if Vicar'd gie me permission."

"You?"

"Why, I'd a fancy that way, sir."

"Mend the organ all by yourself?"

"I' my spare time, you'll understand, sir," Fondie modestly explained, as though the sparseness of the moments to be devoted to the task reduced the merit that his visitor had seemed to see in the undertaking. The young gentleman, with his eyes on the ancient instrument, exhaled:

"How glorious!" as though the breath came from the bottom of his heart. "I would love to help you. Would you let me?"

Fondie, respectfully avoiding the pitfall of the request, and troubled at the threatening enthusiasm his empty dream had awakened, hastened to explain the chimerical nature of it. It was but fancy, said he. He misdooted he would never get it done. Idea had been in his head this two year, off and on. Organ would all be to take to pieces. Pipes would be to clean. Reeds to fittle up and voice. Trackers to repair. Maybe Vicar wouldn't allow syke as him to meddle with it, that had only fittled up a few accordions for farm lads and looked inside a harmonium or two. It's true, he admitted, that he'd had the American organ to bits i' spring, and gien her fresh bellowses, but she didn't belong, as ye mud say, ti sacred building.

The flame of enthusiasm, however, kindled in the boy's bosom proved less easy to extinguish than to create. He told Fondie: "How wonderful you are! You are full of glorious ideas. Where do you get them from? I never have such ideas." And for the first time in his life Fondie Bassiemoor found himself gazed at with eyes of unmitigated admiration. Nothing would satisfy their owner now but that Fondie should instruct him how to blow, and, having instructed him in this, that Fondie should display his musical ability; and having displayed his musical ability in the first nine of "Dr. Ezra Blenkinson's Melodious and Progressive Voluntaries," that Fondie should explain the organ and its principles, and teach the young gentleman how to apply his fingers to the keys—all of which Fondie did in a spirit compounded of pride, of humility, of misgivings, and despondent apprehension; misdooting gravely at the end that he was very much to blame. His visitor asked: "What for?" "For having gien way to ye, sir," Fondie explained. "Fault's mine. I'se jealous I should 'a done better ti dissuade you fro' first."

"You're not to blame at all," the young gentleman contended loyally. "I asked you, and you couldn't help it. If anything

happens, I shall tell him so." He inquired, with a sudden look of anxiety, concerning the passage of time—and when Fondie informed him that it was now nearing five o'clock, could scarcely credit they had been close upon two hours in the church. Thanking Fondie for Fondie's kindness with a voice of such gratitude as to bring back Fondie's blushes, he said, "I must leave you at once. Will you forgive me for running away? You know why. I'd love to stop. I'm not a bit tired. When shall you be here again?"

Fondie answered dubiously: "It's bad ti tell, sir."

"Do you mean you'd rather not tell me?" the young gentleman inquired, with a sudden acuteness of perception for which Fondie had scarcely bargained.

"I should be sorry for ye ti think that, sir. What I meant was, it all depends."

"Depends on what?"

"On a deal o' things, sir. Saturdays is only day I'se likely ti be free i' afternoon. And sometimes I'se not free then. And it depends on who'd blow for me an' all."

"I would blow," said the boy immediately, and then added: "But it depends in my case too. Will you try and come next Saturday? Do."

Fondie's countenance, that had visibly hesitated at the first request, succumbed to the second briefer but more persuasive appeal.

"I'll try, sir," said he.

"And I'll try, too," the boy declared. "I may not be able to get here. If I'm not here, you'll know how it is, won't you? You'll know it's not because I don't want to come, but because I can't. And I shall be thinking about you. Good-bye."

Fondie was frightened that the young gentleman had so far lost sight of what was suitable to his station as to be on the point of putting out his hand, and hurriedly busied himself with the closing of the organ. "Good day, sir."

The young gentleman from the old house turned on his heel

for a moment to watch the replacement of the stops, and then slipped quietly from the chancel. Fondie performed the last offices with a curious sense of detachment and unreality, as though this afternoon's episode and his present self pertained to a dream. If his visitor had taken away a mind enriched with memories of music, Fondie's own head held less of this than memories of a soft and educated voice, whose accents—like all other forms of beauty—disquieted him with a vague desire to make them his own. Even the humility of such a one as Fondie was quickened to some sort of resemblance to pride by the thought that the grandson of a gentleman with the profile of a blood horse, who wore gaiters on his feet, had found him not altogether beneath notice, and his attainments not altogether the fitting food of scorn.

"Nobbut I could only speak like him . . ." Fondie thought longingly to himself as he tucked Dr. Ezra Blenkinson beneath his arm, when the very voice of his ambition spoke again.

". . . Will you be so kind as to give her this, please"—"this" was "Lord Ronald's Crime; or, The Lost Heir of Weirchester"—"and say I liked it very much?"

"I misdoot . . ." Fondie said when he realized what confronted him, "she'll be better pleased to tek it back frev your own hand, sir, if you can mek it convenient ti do so."

The young gentleman inquired, "Why?"

Fondie repeated, "I misdoot she would, sir. Otherwise I'd gie it back wi' pleasure so far as trouble gans."

"I thought . . . I may not see her for some time," the young gentleman explained. "She may want the book back. I don't know when we shall meet again."

"Why, it's same case wi' me, sir," Fondie said. "Not that I think Miss Blanche will be wanting book back very particular."

"I thought you were always seeing her?" the young gentleman suggested.

"Not si oft, sir," Fondie answered. He thought there was

keenness in the young gentleman's eye when he asked the question, and the young gentleman fancied there was a tinge of sadness in Fondie's voice when Fondie answered it. "But she's plenty o' syke books, sir," Fondie assured him. "You will bide a bit, till you chance ti see her."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, I think so, sir." And Fondie added, after a brief tussle with his conscience and the Devil: "I'll ask Miss Blanche to gie a look round at choch on Saturday if you wish, sir; nobbut you don't see her i' meantime. She'll come wi' pleasure, I knaw. It would gratify her ti shaw ye up tower and discourse wi' ye awhile."

The young gentleman exclaimed, in the first flush of enthusiasm, "Oh, that would be lovely!" But the next moment he thought less favorably of Fondie's magnanimous proposition, saying no, he was much obliged, but he would rather Fondie did not tell her about the church. It might spoil the music and their talk. He would prefer the two of them to be alone. It was a tremendous compliment, the most tremendous compliment that any young gentleman could have paid, to say he preferred the company of the wheelwright's son to the Vicar's daughter—even with the prospect of a personally conducted excursion to the church roof.

"Just as you please, sir," Fondie assented. "... Is there ... is there any particular message you'd like me ti gie her, sir; and if I speaks truth she'll maybe ask question."

The young gentleman considered for awhile. "Not that I can think of," he said, "except about the book. Tell her I read it through three times; and thank her very much for me. Now I must run. Good-bye again, and thank *you*."

"Good day, sir," said Fondie.

The young gentleman from the old house took to his heels and left the sacred building at a run. No trace of him was visible when Fondie emerged sedately from the porch into the fragrant glory of the June sunlight.

XL

TO Whivvle, Mersham Hall was what Madame Tussaud's and the Tower are to London, drawing visitors to gaze at it from miles around. Conversationally it formed the first thing we turned to after the weather, and when strangers admitted they had never seen or heard of this historic place, farmers' wives threw up their hands and eyebrows and said, "Oh, my word!" with almost the commiseration for an education neglected.

For Mersham Hall had been tenantless these twenty years or more when first I knew it. "Wi' a mortgage" (as Dod's father was wont to say) "twice ower ti every brick." The water in the broad moat that flowed under the bridge before the western front between revetments of brick had the stagnancy of Dod's father's duck-pond in a dry summer, and smelt little different. Where, once, white swans had arched indolently splendid necks to view their mirrored stateliness, domestic ducks turned upside down without the least compunction in the water, to disturb all that was worst in it and litter the scummy surface wih discarded feathers. The great house-clock in its turret above the portico was as handleless as the cripple mendicant with the tin mug round his neck, who stood in Hunmouth High Street on market days, turning "Rock of Ages" with a wrist; and the pigeons and other birds haunting the turret had so thickly lined the dial of the clock that the hours of twelve and six were smeared out of sight. The peacocks, too, that raised their proud cries when rain portended and paced their stately pavans upon the terrace, and came in all their feathered pride to table at Christmas, along with the tusked boar's head and those traditional platters of pomp and rejoicing with which the mighty celebrate the festival—all these were things of the past; mere fading echoes of the accents of splendor with which the last real owner had proclaimed his greatness

to the world and expended all his pride and patrimony in the expression of it.

As a boy, Dod's father knew him well by sight, the great Sir Lancelot; and had drawn his heels together in the roadway with a click, and doffed his cap as the schoolmaster taught him, times out of number when the baronet passed by. In his telling, the act came to acquire even a dignity of its own, and the hand that had doffed Dod's father's cap to the actual master of the Mersham acres seemed now, in some wise, heritor of a portion of the dead man's greatness. A little shabby, undistinguished man in his own person, he appears to have been, by all accounts, imbued with the opinion that his acres sufficiently dressed him and that the owner of so many needed no other habiliment than his name and state, of which he contributed the meanest feature. Whilst his servants trembled beneath a rule as inexorable as nature's own, and a footman (it is said) would have been dismissed at a moment's notice without a character for a crease in the calf of his white stocking, the baronet drew distinction from a lofty contempt of the outward forms to which his scraping menials subscribed, and appreciated no finer compliment than to be mistaken for a tramp or road-mender upon his own estate; to which laudable end he walked about in a dingy blunt-crowned hat and a faded covert coat, worn sleeveless and tied under his chin, that had been the despair of a whole succession of gentlemen's gentlemen.

But his passion was horses and all that pertained to them. Dod's father has told me, times innumerable, how many horses put their noses to the crib in the Mersham stables, and how much hay and corn they ground up in a week; and how many grooms there were to look after them. But I was never strong in arithmetic, and I always forgot the figures in the task of expressing suitable surprise; mixing up the horses with the grooms, and the grooms with tons of hay and quarters of corn, and the hay and corn with the loose boxes, and the loose boxes with the total in rugs and harness. Nevertheless, the figures

were prodigious. Dod's father used to take his pipe out of his mouth every time in telling them, and if they could astonish Dod's father I felt I was safe in allowing them to astonish me. For Dod's father had six huge horses in the capacious dimness of his stable, that filled the stable with a rumbling diapason as of millstones when they ground their food, and their big warm bodies made the stable the most comfortable place in the world to sit in in cold weather. But Dod's father scouted the bare idea of comparison, and said: "Thoo dizn't know what thoo's talking about!" Each of the Mersham horses had a bath-sponge and towel to itself, and a groom; and each groom had an under-groom to kick and lay the blame on; and each under-groom had a stable-lad to kick in turn, or fling the stable besom at. Four-in-hand was Sir Lancelot's hobby. His greatness stooped to drive nothing less. There were half a dozen coaches in the Mersham coach-house, with panels bright as glass and naves of silver; and fours of nearly every color to put in them—black, brown, bay, roan, piebald, skewbald, cream and white, in variety sufficient to rejoice the soul of a circus proprietor.

By six in the morning, and on midsummer mornings much earlier, Sir Lancelot swallowed his basin of bread and milk that was (woe betide its belated bringer!) brought up to his dressing-room. But a few minutes after, his first oath was heard in the stable court. The sound of his morning cough caused the grooms to run about the yard after imaginary duties as though they chased a hare, and there was no cessation of activity until he drove out of the stable gates. All day long, allowing the briefest intervals for meals, the coach went rumbling about the Mersham roads, with flunkeys stuck all over it as thick as flies on a treacle-paper. Alternate couples dropped to earth at every gatestead—outspeeding the horses so that there should be no stoppage in their stride, and swinging up to their place again like clockwork as the coach rolled by. Sir Lancelot would train his steeds down the narrowest lanes and

round the sharpest corners; driving them in and out of his tenants' stockyards to practice sharp turns round the pikes and steddles—to the tenantry's infinite and respectful inconvenience in harvest time. If he fetched a gatepost off, the Mersham joiner reset it that day; if the wheel of the coach came (as not infrequently happened) to grief, the baronet cursed it and changed his coach. With six coaches to draw upon, it was but rarely that he had not one, at least, in running order. My lady, when she still lived with her husband, and had not yet come to the crossways with him under a deed of separation—though occupying her own wing of the hall, and partaking of her own meals in her own apartments—my lady drove out when she deigned to take the common air, in an open carriage with four horses and outriders, who bobbed violently up and down in the saddle as though the saddle were red-hot; and she was one of the last in this part of the world to retain the services of runners, whose duty was to keep up with her ladyship's carriage in tunics far too tight for them. By her side, on such journeyings, it was her custom to take a silk-lined satchel containing small pieces of silver currency, wrapped up in tissue paper so as not to soil her gloves, that she dropped from time to time over the carriage panels when she passed groups of curtseying children or a mother holding up some recent baby by a cottage door. After the deed of separation her ladyship left Mersham in a chariot as closely shuttered as if it held a fever patient, and lived the rest of her life abroad. She was much missed by the Mersham children, but her absence caused no diminution in the scale of the Mersham magnificence. Upwards of forty servants fattened their legs beneath the baronet's table; each (as Dod's father said) with another servant to wait on him. An ox went no way among this multitude of mouths, the diet below stairs being so unstinted that twelve months of it were sufficient to thicken the breathing of the thinnest manservant alive and double the diameter of a footman's calf. Footmen fed up to butlers in no time, and stable-lads were

full-blown coachmen before this fatal tendency could be checked, or apoplexy had cleared a box seat for them.

Everything at Mersham had to be enormously in excess of human requirements: more dogs than could be exercised, more horses than could be ridden, more rooms than could be lived in, more servants than employment could possibly be found for. The place buzzed with the useless activities of magnificent drones, whose sole function was to produce flesh and splendor and fill the mansion with that fine atmosphere of subjugated deference so essential to the constitution of a stately home. The very air seemed menialized, rendered lukewarm by footmen's legs, and disciplined by their breathing into a condition of tepid fitness for the lungs of the august. Even the upkeep of Sir Lancelot's ladies was maintained upon the same superfluously lavish scale. There were three of them in Hunmouth alone and two in Beeminster, and not a few were suspected in parishes round about the hall. And though the baronet might visit them in his covert coat and blunt-crowned hat not once a quarter during the hunting season, their services and stipend ceased the same moment they were not at home to receive his call.

With Sir Lancelot's death the old period of splendor passed away, and his funeral constituted the last act in Mersham magnificence. Half the county pursued his body to the vault as closely as if he had been a fox. All the public bodies, societies, hunts, manors, wapentakes, councils, charities, commissions, and parishes were represented—many by floral tributes of massive splendor and superb chastity. Every beneficed clergyman for miles around was present, including sufficient canons to withstand a siege, in order to pay tribute to the deceased baronet's virtues and deduce for the use of parishioners next Sunday a Christian lesson from his exemplary life and death.

And meanwhile the mortgagees were busy. Legal-faced gentlemen in black silk hats and shaven clerks with faces as sharp as a woodfeller's axe came and went by every train. The

Mer sham estate began to labor visibly in deep waters like a dismasted and foundering ship. All the fleshy gentlemen went, and the corpulent coachmen and belted grooms, and the magnificence of which they had formed a corporate and impressive part melted fast like summer snow. Land came under the hammer. Trees were felled. Hounds and horses changed hands. The young baronet, who had taken his mother's side in the domestic estrangement, found himself heir only to litigation and motions in Chancery, and died abroad within two years of his father's death—some said of chagrin. His body was not even brought to Mer sham—possibly because an estate so encumbered could not rise to any second obsequies worth the name in such a trifling space of time.

His demise extinguished the last flickering spark of Mer sham's vital magnificence. Litigation furnished a successor to the encumbered acres and added a further charge upon them, but the claimant died before judgment was pronounced in his favor, and Chancery plucked up heart again. Litigation was resumed. Echoes of the distant conflict, like mutterings of battle waged afar, reached Mer sham from the law courts, where the name of Mer sham figured perpetually in the Cause Lists, and wigged counsel droning dismally in the ears of somnolent judges lived like fighting-cocks upon the subject of succession to the Mer sham acres. It was known at last, however—even in Mer sham—that the baronetcy had lapsed, and that the new heir brought neither means nor title to the rehabilitation of the old home.

And the succession was more nominal than real, for he took up no residence at Mer sham. Men who knew said it would need all the new squire's lifetime to pay off the mortgages; and men who knew better said, "Aye, and more." For years the hall molded as its once august master had left it, without ministration from either painter, bricklayer, carpenter, or plumber, and fell into an incredible state of neglect. Birds gained ingress to the rooms through chimneys and broken win-

dows. Robins rested on gilded picture-frames in the gallery, and starlings fed their young in the débris-littered hangings of state beds.

A caretaker, situate with his wife in the desolate servants' wing, represented all that remained of the house's fallen state; and reaped so rich a harvest through displaying its inward portions to the curious—who frequented the place with picnic-baskets in numbers during summer—that he was able to take a licensed house in Hunmouth with the proceeds the moment this source of revenue was prohibited, declaring in a spirit of laudable independence that he didn't care for squire, agents, lawyer, nor none of them, and wouldn't let nobody living interfere with him, nor teach him his business; and if that was going to be the rule (which it was) he would "go" (which he did), and they must look after things themselves—which they forthwith proceeded to do; repairing, as the depleted funds permitted, the broken windows and the defective spouting, and contesting the internal ravages a room at a time.

XLII

SOMEWHERE about the middle of the following week Fondie Bassiemoor received a letter. In Fondie Bassiemoor's life this was an event. Letters were not habitual with him, even in the way of business, for Whivvle had recourse much more largely to the spoken word than the written symbol in its transactions, and urgent messages from no farther off than the next parish reached the wheelwright's yard by transmission through as many as half a dozen mouths, taking anything from twenty-four hours to a week in transit, and even touching Hunmouth market on the way; going in by one carrier along with the butter and eggs and coming out by another with the linseed cake and groceries.

Blanche's brother Bullocky brought the letter. Having whistled "Phwt!" from the yard-end with two fingers, he

followed the whistle into the yard—where neither it nor he, in the wheelwright's opinion, was wanted—and asked the wheelwright, whom the whistle and subsequent footsteps had brought to the kitchen door, "Where's Fondie?" without showing the least discomposure at sight of the wheelwright's beard; a request that the wheelwright answered by demanding, "Who's thoo whistling after? Dog?"

"Is he i' warkshop?" the Bullocky inquired, undeterred by the rebuke and the stern displeasure seated on the wheelwright's bristling beard and brow. For sole answer the wheelwright retired into the kitchen and pushed to the kitchen door, but the sound of voices had already drawn Fondie from the workshop with a doweling-bit in his hand. His reception of the Vicar's son was in marked contrast to that extended by his parent. He bade the visitor "Good day, Master Alick," in a voice of such politeness that the kitchen door reopened violently of a sudden and the wheelwright's voice demanded:

"Whoo's thoo Mastering? Let folk master their manners fust, before thoo Masters them."

". . . I'se gotten summut for thee, Fondie Bassiemoor," the Vicar's son announced, when the effect of this proclamation had passed away and the kitchen door had been closed again. Fondie tendered a pained and hurried apology for his sire's disrespect.

"I beg ye'll think no more about it, Master Alick. It's my feythur's way. He's not si young as he was. He means nowt by it. Did I understand ye to say you'd brought me something?"

"Aye," said the Bullocky, without making any attempt to disclose the nature of the thing brought. "What'll thoo gie me for it?"

"Why, it depends upon what it is, Master Alick," Fondie answered. "I misdoot it wean't be worth a deal if it's meant for me."

"It's a letter an' all," the Bullocky informed him. "Óor lass gied it me ti bring thee."

The mention of "oor lass" was strategical on the Bullocky's part, and had its prompt effect.

"If a penny's onny use to ye, sir," Fondie said, "ye're welcome tiv it."

"Mek it two," said the Vicar's son.

"I misdoot tuppence is a large sum ti gie for a letter that belongs me, sir," Fondie suggested, albeit respectfully.

"Who says it belongs thee?" the Bullocky demanded. "It dizn't belong thee yet. And nobbut thoo gies me tuppence it wean't. I s'll tek letter back tiv oor lass—or tear it up. Mebbe I s'll tear it up. It wouldn't be fost. She shouldn't 'a gien it me."

The threat of such destruction sent Fondie's fingers into his right-hand pocket without delay.

"Why . . . I'se much obliged ti ye for bringing it, Master Alexis," he said, and the stipulated coppers crossed with a most crumpled, soiled, and generally unhygienic envelope that the Bullocky drew out of his breast pocket and relinquished the moment his right hand made sure of Fondie's pennies.

"I knaw who letter's frev," he vouchsafed, as soon as the exchange was duly effected. "It's frev yon lad at aud house. He gied it Blanche last Friday for thee. She forgot it o' Sunday." And his curiosity being awakened now that acquisitiveness was satisfied, he demanded, "What's it about? Open it and read what he says."

But Fondie's sense of honor stood firm at this.

"I misdoot I'se no right to do that, Master Aleck," he said. "Letter mud be private."

"Thoo needn't bother," the Bullocky retorted. "Oor lass opened it. I'se read all there is."

"I misdoot you're speaking waggishly, Master Aleck," Fondie said. "I hope I knaw ye better than ti fear ye'd do any syke thing."

"Do you!" cried the Bullocky. "Thoo wait while next time. That's all." And went off, kicking the wheelwright's

gravel noisily with both feet and whistling offensively as he left. Fondie, returning to the pine-scented workshop, read the letter by the bench. It was addressed in a most precise and level hand to Mr. Bassiemoor, Jun., and was penned with such faultless legibility inside that Fondie could peruse every word at first sight.

"Dear Mr. Bassiemoor," the letter ran.

It was the first time in his life that Fondie—either by word of mouth or stroke of pen—had ever been addressed as Mr. Bassiemoor. The experience was so unusual, and—despite its formality—so pleasant, that he lingered over it, and read this prefatory part of the missive a second time to extract the full flavor from it, before proceeding. After all . . .

DEAR MR. BASSIEMOOR [Fondie began again]:

It is with deep regret I am writing to tell you that I shall not be able to come to the church on Saturday as arranged, so please do not expect me. I have to go somewhere with my grandfather that afternoon.

"It is a great disappointment to me, for I had been looking forward so much to seeing you again. Now I don't know when it will be. I hope soon.

Trusting you are well,

I remain, yours sincerely,

L. G. D'A. MERSHAM.

P. S. I shall be thinking of you on Saturday. I hope you will find someone to blow for you.

The letter went into Fondie Bassiemoor's breast pocket—or rather went in and out of it—as restlessly as Jarge Amery goes in and out of the White Cow in the course of a droughty afternoon. Every now and then Fondie would regale himself with the sight of its polite and lucid penmanship, till the wheelwright, testily conscious of the existence of some secret element in the air about him, cried exasperatedly at last: "What's thoo gotten? Is it owt ti eat? Thoo keeps munching at it strangelins behind thy coat."

At night Fondie transferred the precious document to the private box that lay by his bedhead; all wall-papered to match the room, and containing nothing private and particular, despite its key and padlock. Once in bed, Fondie Bassiemoor struck a match and read the admired letter yet again. In some subtle and inexplicable way it seemed to be associated with his thoughts of Blanche. It was as though some new current had flowed into his life, filling the channel of his aspirations and buoying his hopes. Only to be able to write a letter like this! To be sure of his pen and of his words! To speak and act like the writer of it! To be the best of which he was capable! To be worthy of all the confidence reposed in him! To rise to that higher life in which is humble faith believed, through the purifying of his self and the shedding of all errors and grosser particles! To deserve, if never to attain! And to merit—though unsuccessful—this humble epitaph at least upon his tomb:

HE DID HIS BEST.

XLIII

FOR the space of a fortnight or thereabouts Fondie Bassiemoor saw nothing of the young gentleman from the aud hoose, and scarcely more of the Vicar's daughter. The Anniversary season being now well set in, and the Kissing Ring at its height, Blanche Bellwood had too many calls upon her time and attractions in other quarters to give much thought to Fondie, whom she regarded merely as a set-by for wet weather or social dog-days; taking him up as she would even take up her music on those occasions when the weather was too sickening for any other form of exercise. With the Anniversaries and Kissing Ring season, too, Blanche Bellwood began to wear on weekdays her Sunday frock of the summer before, and the first of the strange bicyclists began to ride

through Whivvle, asking their way, and ringing their bells at odd lane-ends without apparent cause. Also Blanche Bellwood developed acute interest in the coming of the post, and would even run out to meet the postman as soon as the gate clicked. From this time onward, unfamiliar worshippers—possessed of not the least aptitude for hymns—might be expected at church on Sunday, though August and early September were the chief months, which appeared to coincide generally with the school vacation.

For Fondie, too, the season brought its special obligations in respect of hay-reapers and wagons, that drew up in the roadway before the signboard as many as three deep, whilst more than that number cumbered the yard on days when cutting was at a standstill, for the firm of J. BASSIEMOOR & SON had a reputation in excess of local among implements of all sorts, and there were not a few farmers who would sooner send their repairs six miles or over to the Whivvle yard than commit them to the care of more proximate and less satisfactory smiths—a state of things which, though very complimentary to the Bassiemoor firm, occasioned some discontent in sundry quarters, where it was averred that Joe Bassiemoor begrudged folk their living, and would take the bread and jam out of a bairn's mouth if he could do it without being seen.

The old man was acting well up to this tradition one afternoon toward the end of the second week, sedulously picking through the rusty hoops and scraps of iron with which one side of the yard was littered in quest of a bolt of a certain size that his own hands had extracted from a set of old shelvings and thrown there not eighteen months before, when the young gentleman from the aud hoose came into the yard with his quick and slightly nervous step and, addressing the patched blue seat of the wheelwright's trousers (which was the only portion of the wheelwright paying him the least attention at the moment), asked if "Mr. Bassiemoor" were at home.

The wheelwright did not immediately cease his exertions,

but continued to grope among the bits of old iron, considering this and weighing that, and gazing fixedly at the other as though dark memories of fifty years ago had been brought under review. Finally he smote the palms of his hands together, and turned upon the young gentleman of the aud hoose with the brief acknowledgment, "Aye. He is."

The young gentleman asked: "May I speak to him, please?"

"You're speakin' tiv him noo," the wheelwright rejoined.

The young gentleman, visibly taken back by the unexpected statement, begged the speaker's pardon.

"I meant the other Mr. Bassiemoor," he said. "Mr. Bassiemoor, Junior." By his lips, too, it appeared he was imparting something else of a more or less apologetic nature, but the wheelwright paid no heed to this.

There was no other Mr. Bassiemoor (said he) that he knew on—unless the visitor meant Fondie. The young gentleman answered that he did, and asked (apparently for politeness' sake) if Fondie were at home.

"If he ought ti be onnyweers else, he will be," the wheelwright uttered darkly, and barked "Fondie!" through his beard—that had rusty nails and iron filings entangled in it, and a wax vesta—and added "Thoo's wanted!" when Fondie appeared at the workshop door. With which he resumed his work upon the scrap-heap, muttering: "There's gotten ti be a strange deal of misters and masters nowadays. Parson' son nobbut a while back; an' noo it's thoo. Whivvle wean't be big eneaf ti hod 'em all soon."

The young gentleman (as he made haste to explain to Fondie) had not come to stop.

"Folk never diz!" muttered the wheelwright into his beard. "Nobbut they've just a minute ti spare they'll bide upon spot all day."

He had no time to spend. By rights (said he) he ought not to be there. He had been sent to purchase a bottle of ink under strict injunctions to return without delay. But he had run

most of the way so that he might have a few minutes with Mr. Bassiemoor and say how sorry he was not to have seen him on Saturday, and he would run most of the way back again. "And I shall do what Blanche does," he declared recklessly. "I shall say I tried the wrong shops and they kept me waiting. I don't care. Blanche doesn't. What can he do if he finds out?"

But for the fact that they were now beyond the wheelwright's earshot, the wheelwright's opinion upon this fine point would have been worth having. Fondie, fingering the blade of a chisel with self-depreciatory fingers, as though confessing himself but an imperfect performer upon the instrument, misdooted that it was bad ti tell, and moreover "not for syke as me ti say, sir." The young gentleman did not pursue the moral issues of the question.

"I saw Blanche," he informed Fondie. "Perhaps she told you."

Fondie, with his customary discretion, said: "I'se fit ti think Miss Blanche named it, sir."

"... She happened to be passing the gate," the young gentleman continued, and Fondie did not even blink with the force of this curious coincidence. "It was just after I had written the letter. I meant to bring it round to you myself and leave it if you were not at home. I felt sure he was asleep." The young gentleman paused at this stage of the narrative with an eye on Fondie that seemed as though desirous of eliciting some sign; but Fondie modestly fingered the blade of the chisel, and contributed nothing more definite than a respectful "Indeed, sir!" void of any surprise or presumptuous inquiry.

"... Only Blanche said," the narrator proceeded, "Blanche said, what was the use? She would give you the letter if I liked. She asked me to come along with her instead." Here the young gentleman's voice and eyes suggested a certain lapse of time. "... We went as far as the pond. Now I know where it is. ... Did she give you the letter?"

Fondie said, with sudden contrition: "I ought tiv a' thanked you for it wi'oot waiting ti be asked, sir, if my manners was what they should 'a been. I'se jealous I wasn't worth trouble o' writing ti, sir; and thank you."

The young gentleman said: "I wanted to write to you. I liked doing it. Did Blanche give it you in time?"

Remembrance of the Bullocky and the episode of the belated epistle bought from him at a price caused Fondie to finger his chisel uneasily, as if he had discovered a flaw in it by the sense of touch, but he answered with fitting gratitude:

"In very nice time, thank you."

Perhaps the young gentleman was possessed already of misgivings in regard to the letter's delivery. Perhaps, also, he had arrived at some proficiency in his knowledge of Fondie's nature, for he added: "Did she give it you before you went to church on Saturday?"

"Why . . . not exactly before, sir," Fondie admitted, "but I got it i' good time after."

"How long after?"

"Why . . . about a couple o' days, sir, si far as my memory sarves me."

"Did Blanche give it you herself?"

"She sent Master Aleck wi' it, sir," Fondie answered. But he did not divulge the price paid for it, and the young gentleman did not ask. He merely sealed this part of his inquiry with a dubitative "Oh!"

"I'se read letter a deal o' times," Fondie confided, dropping his voice to a level that would not have been out of place in an expression of condolence. "It's been a great comfort ti me, sir. I was only looking at her this morning. Onnybody couldn't wish ti read a better wrote or beautiful-worded letter."

The young gentleman was prompt to assure Fondie that this admired letter had been the product of no particular pains. As soon as he knew that there would be no church for him on Saturday he had just sat down and written it. And he had

to write very quickly, because of Him. The Third Personal Pronoun Singular (it seemed) had been most troublesome and active of late. Blanche said her father was the same. The mention of fathers caused the young gentleman to cast a furtive eye upon the figure of the wheelwright, still picking and sifting, amid the débris of old iron, and drop his voice over the awed query, "What's *your* father like?"

Fondie, fingering the chisel with filial submissiveness, answered:

"He's getting an aud man, sir, as you'll maybe discern, but I'se jealous he's a deal better father than son deserves. I misdoot I don't vally him according-ly as I should."

The young gentleman made a murmurous expression of gratified politeness. "Is he strict?"

"Not si strict as he used ti be, sir," Fondie confided, "but I can't expect it. Aud gentleman's not ti blame for that. It's his years. I isn't grumbling. He hasn't strength, noo, he had. I'se sometimes wished I mud 'a been born sooner, while my feythur was in his prime and could 'a dealt firmer wi' me. This last two or three years, I misdoot, he's shown me ower-mich indulgence—and I'se not one that can bide a deal o' that. It only spoils me, sir. I'se jealous I gets more o' my own way than's good for me."

The young gentleman subscribed polite attention to sentiments manifestly beyond his capacity to assimilate or understand. But he did not dwell upon a subject so much more abstruse than his mind had been prepared for, and quitted the topic, indeed, with the cheerful alacrity that even pious people will betray at times in leaving the house of worship, asking Fondie if he proposed to be at the organ next Saturday afternoon.

"All being well, sir," Fondie answered, "I'se i' hopes o' doing so."

The young gentleman did not know whether he would be able to be present. He meant to try his very best. If need were, he told Fondie, in tones of such untroubled candor as to make

Fondie's hypercritical piety wince—if need were, he would pretend to have a headache, like Blanche, and slip out when his grandfather thought he was upstairs in his bedroom. Perhaps the troubled declination of Fondie's eyelids seemed to the young gentleman scarcely sufficient appreciation of such valorous resolve, and he added, in a self-justifying voice:

"Wouldn't *you*?"

Fondie misdooted he was not a fit person to be made arbiter on such a point of rectitude. His father would be a better authority to consult.

"It's not for syke as me ti offer advice, sir," he said, "that stands si badlins in need of it theirsens." Pressed by the young gentleman, however, as to whether he would himself do such a thing or not, he gave reluctant judgment in favor of the not, pointing out at the same time that his judgment was of no real value, and that he was as likely to be wrong as anybody, and probably more so.

"What I diz or dizn't do, sir," he admitted to the young gentleman, "dizn't seem ti mek a deal o' difference i' long run. It's mostlings wrong i' end. I can't very well explain it. I seem ti' 'a that faculty."

"Blanche would do it," the young gentleman affirmed confidently. "She told me she would. She has done. She asked me why I didn't do it too. She said she wasn't frightened. She didn't care if they found her out. What could they do at her? She didn't believe in cowards. Why should we do what other people tell us to do, if we don't want? And why should we be expected to tell the truth? People never believe us unless they like, she says. It would be easier for everybody if nobody believed anybody. Then they wouldn't ask questions at all, and people would do as they liked without any bother. Blanche says it's sickening."

Fondie Bassiemoor recognized too well this presentment of the moral lineaments of the Vicar's daughter, faithfully portrayed, but he condoned the portrayal with his brief indulgent

smile, misdooting the young gentleman shouldn't take Miss Blanche too readily at her own vallation. "She dizn't allus do hersen justice, sir, i' speech. Onnybody wi'oot knowing her very well mud think maybe she was different fro' what she reallins is. Not that it's for syke as me," he added, sensible of his impropriety in even attempting to interpret the accents of such a divinity—"ti mek apologies for syke as her, nor seem ti question her. She's a lady, sir, and I'se nobbut what you see me."

The modest disclaimer appeared to raise a new issue in the young gentleman's mind.

"Do you call her a lady?" he asked Fondie with embarrassing suddenness.

It was a question for which Fondie was visibly so unprepared that at first he could do no more than strop the chisel impotently on his palm, as though trying to put an edge upon his own thoughts.

"Why . . ." he conceded slowly, after awhile, "I'll own your reproof is merited, sir. It's not for syke as me, in a manner o' speaking, ti call her or onnybody else onnything. I wadn't set my opinion against yours, sir. Maybe you'll think different."

It appeared, to some degree, the young gentleman did. He said, though not without a certain amount of deliberation in the saying, as if the judgment were being weighed even whilst he uttered it: "I don't think I should call her a lady. She does not speak correctly," he said, as though sensible that Fondie's modest "Indeed, sir?" were still (despite its external humility) open to conviction. "She says, 'I aren't,' and 'I hadn't need,' and 'in house.' And she calls people 'silly fools.' I don't think a lady ought to do that."

Nevertheless, despite the lack of ladyship, he decided that the Vicar's daughter was rather beautiful, and invited Fondie Bassiemoor to say if he did not think so; whereat Fondie's color visibly rose and the fond or truthful part of him, thus directly

invoked—and drawn on by a something persuasively sympathetic in the young gentleman's voice and eye—made modest answer, "I misdoot I do, sir." A wave of misgiving surged up after the confession and caused him to beg the young gentleman that he would not "name it ti onnybody"—for which request he apologized in turn, saying he hoped the young gentleman would forgive him, and not take the request amiss. The young gentleman appeared to be on the point of conferring plenary forgiveness when the look of magnanimous assurance on his face gave way to a stare of apprehension, and he begged Fondie for the time.

"I must be going," the young gentleman decided. "What a nuisance! I wish I could have stopped." And he sent a regretful gaze all round the wheelwright's yard and premises as though in appraisement of the attractive surroundings from which he must now forcibly tear himself.

"Is that the workshop—" for their conversation had been carried on just outside its doors—"where you do your work?"

Fondie answered: "Yes, sir. Some of it, at least."

"May I look inside?" He added, more by way of reminder to himself than remark to Fondie, "I mustn't stop."

"You're very welcome, sir," Fondie assured him. "Not that there's a deal ti see. You'll say it's a roughish place, I doot, sir."

The young gentleman, on the contrary, contended: "It's a wonderful place. What a lovely smell it has! I like it. I'd love to work here."

He lent to the shop's observation an eye as enraptured and reverent as any that ever paid tribute to the noblest ecclesiastical edifice, and a nostril that dilated appreciatively to all the many odors with which the half dim, half sunlit interior was filled; the piny fragrance of good red resinous wood (that always clung in some degree to Fondie's clothes and Fondie's person) mingled with odors of paint and turpentine and paraffin and linseed, which the young gentleman inhaled with the

zest for ozone, or drained with as much satisfaction as Jarge Amery would display over the engulfing of a quart of strong ale with a dash of spirit in it.

It was the first workshop, he confided to Fondie, that he had ever been in. Fondie did not assume an air of superiority for the admission—as some people did when their cousin Dod confessed he had never seen inside a theater, or smelled the intoxicating smell of oranges at a pantomime. He only answered:

“Why, sir, it’s not as though workshops was meant for syke gentlefolk as you, that hasn’t to depend on ’em.”

But even this harmless modesty was rebuked by the sentimental part of him, that caused contrition to add:

“Not that I’d say a word against aud spot, sir. Sun falls very pleasant in her at times, particular of a summer evening—very like, as it may be, ti-night, if weather hods. I’ve seen binch and shavings lit up like gold. And times when sun sets red, one might very nigh think shop was afire. I’ve stood and watched it many a time—when I misdoot I ought tiv ’a been doing my wark. Sunsets and syke things is more for gentlefolk, and them ’at has leisure ti enjoy ’em, sir; though very like they’ll think less on ’em because they’re throng wi’ other things that costs more money.”

Forgetful of his recent resolution not to linger, the young gentleman’s interest in his novel surroundings deepened, and only tore itself from one object with reluctance to attach itself by interrogation tenaciously to another. The implements of Fondie’s calling appealed to his very heart. To make their acquaintance by name alone seemed not enough. He must handle them and (where practicable) apply them. The sight of the body of a wagon, unpainted as yet, that floated above a sea of shavings in the far corner, roused his enthusiasm—the greater for the knowledge that it represented Fondie’s unaided work; for all Fondie said he should never have known how to shape syke a thing if his father had not showed him how and

taught a most inapt and dullard pupil the rudiments of his trade.

"It's him that should 'a merit on it, sir," Fondie acknowledged, "not me. All you see there is result of his instruction. I misdoot I don't do him credit I should, nor gie him gratitude enough for what I owe him."

With this phase of the question the young gentleman was less concerned. All his zeal was centered in the thing produced, and all his admiration in the executor of it, declaring himself scarcely able to credit that human agency unassisted could construct such a great and faultless piece of work. And the wheels? Surely Fondie would not make those? Why, Fondie would not make those i' way young gentleman meant, like. All Fondie would do would be to get wood for fellies and spokes fro' timber-yards i' Hunmouth. Carrier would bring those. And some good ellow fro' same place for nef (navè). Carrier would bring ellow an' all. And then all Fondie would have to do would be ti shape 'em up an' put 'em together, sir.

The young gentleman's countenance, that had showed radiant with the joys and desires of enlightenment when the explanation began, suddenly darkened in the middle of it, confronted by the awful visage of the outraged potentate Time. With hurried apologies, saying that now he really *must* be going, he took his leave, the while Fondie's lips grew penitent, asserting fault was his and he should a' knawn better than detain young gentleman when aud gentleman was very like expecting him.

XLIV

AT the church gate the young gentleman took leave of Fondie Bassiemoor after a whole afternoon at the organ, and this time did actually shake the modest and retiring hand that tried its respectful best to save him the necessity

under pretext of being occupied with the church key. But the young gentleman, undeterred, shook both—with surprising friendliness and warmth—saying:

“Good-by, then. So that’s understood. You won’t forget?”

And Fondie Bassiemoor said: “No, sir, he would try and not forget;” and he walked home beneath a burden as heavy as the crock-basket that the traveling hawker balances on his head, for the things that Fondie Bassiemoor undertook so modestly to remember were things he was scarcely likely to forget; things so numerous and so wonderful that they lent a new visage to the world he looked upon after three hours of seclusion in the church chancel, and imparted to life and to himself and to the things he saw and to the things he sensed and thought a new and divinely soulful quality.

It had been an afternoon of comradeship and confidences. From time to time the participants had inflated the lungs of the organ and devoted themselves to the study of music with enthusiasm. Fondie had played the first nine melodious exercises for the young gentleman’s delectation, while the young gentleman had attended to the organ’s respiration; keeping the bellows gently animated as Fondie had told him to do, and watching the leaden indicator at the end of its catgut line with the unwearying intentness that a sanguine Thames angler will dedicate to the watching of his float in the plashing stream. Blanche’s brother scarcely displayed more instinct for pig-jobbing and butchery and the manufacture of arms of precision than the young gentleman did for the blowing of organs. He blew with love and rare discrimination. No nursemaid paid by the month ever rocked her mistress’ baby with more conscience, or punished it with a finer discretion. Only once in a while, distracted by the sound of something unusually gargantuan in the bowels of the laboring instrument, did he suffer his vigilance to lapse while he showed an inquiring forehead round the woodwork, to ask of Fondie:

“What’s that?”

To which Fondie would generally answer:

"I misdoot it's me, sir."

"Was that in the music?"

"Some of it ought ti be, sir," Fondie would return. "But I misdoot most part on it's this boot o' mine. She slipped again, sir, same place as before."

And the young gentleman, sliding on to the slippery organ-bench that Fondie modestly vacated, applied himself to the comprehension of the nineteenth-century descendant of the instrument conceived by Jubal; diligently committing the names of the notes to memory, and learning the formula of the lines and spaces, while Fondie alternately filled the bellows with the firm, steady strokes that bespoke the knowledged practitioner and came round to superintend the disposal of the young gentleman's fingers.

Then, after spells of zealous organship, they fell into intervals of closer and more confidential talk. The young gentleman, allowing his eyes to stray from their work of concentration on the keyboard, took periodic stock of his surroundings, deciding that church was a capital place to meet one's friends in (as Blanche had long ago discovered), and he went on a pilgrimage among the pews, inquiring of Fondie as to who sat in them. He asked where Blanche sat on Sunday, to which Fondie Bassiemoor answered with his modest discretion, "It depends, sir"; and inquiring further, "What on?" was told, "Why, on nothing in particular, as you mud say, sir. On Miss Blanche's fancy. One Sunday she'll sit here; another she'll sit there," he explained, and parenthetically apologized for this particular habit in worship by alleging the smallness of the congregation, and the consequent number of vacant places at disposal—"Not half on 'em sat in, sir." But the discovery of a debilitated prayer-book bearing residuary traces of the name of Blanche seemed to indicate where the proprietress had sat last Sunday, and the young gentleman, with the exclamation, "Oh, look here!" seated himself to study this interesting vestige

of the Vicar's daughter, asking Fondie, "Who did this?" and "Who did that?" for the book was replete with scribblings. "Did Blanche do it?" "I wouldn't undertake ti say she didn't, sir," Fondie conscientiously admitted. Though he was careful to add, in condonement of the offence, "Maybe a long while ago, sir. Before she was grown onnything like what she is."

Apart from verses asserting ownership on the part of several differing claimants, in several differing and uncertain hands, there were some interesting entries that showed the book had served at various times as a vehicle of intercourse between remote worshippers in the way familiar to Whivvle and doubtless sundry other parishes if the truth were only known or could be told; being passed from hand to hand and back again for the transmission of such interrogatives and answers as: "Where are you going after church?" "Wait for us at porch." "Did you see M.?" "W. said, why didn't you write?" And one familiar phrase in Blanche's robust and undisciplined script: "You are a fool."

On the elucidation of these the young gentleman pored with rapt attention, referring to Fondie from time to time on dubious points of authorship, and curious to know whether these correspondences had had the sanctification of church. Being told by Fondie's misdoubtful though indulgent voice that some of them very likely had, sir, he expressed the pious wish that he might be permitted to attend divine worship, and indeed admitted he had already besought permission of the Third Person Singular, but the Singular Third Person with the steel eye had discountenanced the appeal on the ground (as the young gentleman confided) that he did not wish to encourage people. To which Fondie's modest comment was, "Very like not, sir. I misdoot there's some people ready ti tek advantage."

XLV

AND Blanche's prayer-book being in his hand, and thoughts of the Vicar's daughter in both minds, the young gentleman alluded to his meeting with her earlier in the week. Of course he had told Fondie about that? Why, Fondie was fit ti think he had done, sir. He had walked as far as pond wi' young lady—to the best that Fondie's memory served him. Yes, he had walked as far as the pond. Indeed, sir, pond (Fondie opined) would be middling low this time o' year, weather being that dry as it had been. The young gentleman had not noticed whether the pond was low or not. It had a curious smell, and there were many flies—but Blanche hazarded the cryptic remark that these latter were better than people. They had been talking most of the time. (Very like, sir. It's a nice, quiet spot for converse.) Blanche had asked the young gentleman many questions. More questions, he really thought, than she ought to have done. He did not answer the truth to all of them. Why should he? *She* didn't always tell the truth herself. She said she didn't. But he admitted he had liked her much better than before. He scarcely noticed the bigness of her teeth at all now, or the blueness of her eyes. She was wearing a blue frock. Did Fondie know it? Fondie misdooted he had seen the frock a time or two, summer before. And bright yellow shoes. They were new shoes. Her father (so she said) did not approve of them; but she liked them, and wasn't going to care what *he* said. What did *he* know about shoes? He wouldn't let her wear anything at all if he had his way. She had displayed the shoes for the young gentleman's opinion, and asked him how he liked them, and he had liked them very much, though he told Fondie they were very yellow.

“. . . And then,” the young gentleman concluded, “I said I must be going. . . . And so I did.”

The conclusion sounded, even to Fondie's indulgent ears, somewhat lame and unconvincing. And that the young gentleman felt the same in regard to it was evidenced by the immediate lowering of his eyes.

"At least," he added, and the eyelashes, declined over the prayer-book, fluttered, "I did after awhile." He paused, and added again: "She said I might kiss her if I liked."

The admission was valorously made, with all the force of confidence and candor behind it, bringing up a faint self-conscious flush into the young gentleman's cheek. Fondie, without so much as a tremor in his voice to denote an emotion discovered or a slumbering jealousy stirred, uttered a respectfully dispassionate "Indeed, sir!" that did not even presume to hint at the least curiosity to be told more than the young gentleman, in his wisdom, deemed adequate.

The young gentleman said: "I thought I would let you know."

Fondie acknowledged this further proof of confidence with a modest "Thank you, sir." "Not," he stated in a humbler voice, "that it consarns me a deal, sir"—but the young gentleman did not hear this, by reason of his own desire to add without delay, "I didn't kiss her. I nearly did when she said I daredn't. I felt it wasn't fair to you."

"To *me*, sir?" Fondie Bassiemoor asked, with the blank scepticism that cannot credit its ears with having heard aright.

"Yes, to you."

"I misdoot you shouldn't 'a considered me, sir," Fondie reflected. "I'se sorry you should 'a done that, and Miss Blanche would be an' all, I know. It's not a matter that consarns me i' onny way, sir."

"It does concern you. You knew her first. You knew her long before I did. And I told her so. I said, 'Ask Mr. Bassiemoor to kiss you.'"

The look of incredulity on Fondie's countenance sharpened to a look approaching pain. His lips could only falter "You

did, sir?" while his other thoughts, like a flock of disturbed pigeons, wheeled round and round in turbulent circles, and would not settle within the vicinity of his lips. Through the distracting tumult of his own emotions, Fondie heard the young gentleman remark: "She said you couldn't. You didn't know how."

Fondie expressed the pious fear that the young lady did him too much credit, and in blushing response to the young gentleman's ingenuous query, "Do you?" answered, "I misdoot I do, sir,"

The young gentleman, lowering his voice to a tone appropriate to confidences, asked Fondie:

"Have you ever kissed anybody?"

"When I was younger I did, sir," Fondie admitted. "I can remember kissing my mother of a neet, and my aunt and sister, and another aunt that died, noo and again. But maybe that isn't what you mean, sir."

The young gentleman confessed that, strictly speaking, it scarcely was. He meant: Had Fondie ever kissed anybody in particular? In that interpretation Fondie misdooted that he hadn't, sir. Maybe fault was as mich his as anybody's. But what wi' organ and workshop he didn't seem to get a deal o' time for onnything else. The young gentleman confessed that his own case was similar. He had read about kissing in books—where it seemed to be highly spoken of. There was a lot of kissing—some of it doubly underlined—in No. XLV of the *Sunday Sacred*, "Twixt Love and Faith." Blanche had handed him the copy with her thumb on this part of it, saying, "Read that!" But his own life had contained singularly and disappointingly little. He could not remember kissing anybody since childhood, and that only indistinctly. He wondered what kissing was really like? Fondie wondered, respectfully, too. Blanche, of course (said the young gentleman), would know.

"I expect she will, sir," Fondie subscribed.

"There must be something in it," the young gentleman pursued.

"I misdoot there must be, sir," Fondie agreed.

"Though I don't see why there should be, after all," the young gentleman propounded.

Fondie, ever acquiescent, said: "Why, no, he didn't see why there should be a deal. Maybe it was nobbut an idle habit that grew on folk, like smoking or drinking." The young gentleman held that, after all, a love-story would be hopelessly incomplete without kissing, and that, lacking this osculatory aid, no real love could ever make advancement. Starting from which premise he dug the spade of frank inquiry deeper and deeper into the honest loam of Fondie's confidence, and exposed at last the fibrous roots of Fondie's passion in their rich, respectful subsoil.

"I misdoot, sir . . ." Fondie said, when the full significance of this ultimate revelation dawned upon him, ". . . I misdoot I've said more than I've onny right to say ti onnybody. I've never said it ti onnybody before, and I don't know that I've ever said it quite si plain ti mysen. I've jealous you'll blame me, sir; and I know I stands desarving o' rebuke."

But the young gentleman was far from allocating blame or apportioning rebuke. On the contrary, he showed the keenest gratification in this sacred confidence unearthed, saying it was as wonderful as anything in the *Sunday Sacreds*, and taking as much personal interest in Fondie's passion as if it had been his own, and praising his perspicacity for having divined Fondie's affections from the first. Nor would he accept Fondie's estimate of the hopelessness of the passion.

"I misdoot I should do better ti bury it oot o' sight at once, sir, and master mysen. It's what I've made up my mind ti do a score o' times, and hasn't done. My own sense tells me naught can come on it."

Why, asked the young gentleman, should nothing come of it? If Lord Vavasour had thought the same, would he ever

have married Gracie Goodwin? Why should Fondie seek to slay his love in this melancholy and promiscuous way, and bury it like a dog?

Of Fondie's unworthiness the young gentleman would not hear. He paid so many tributes to the qualities of Fondie's head and hands and heart that Fondie's ear-tips gleamed like forge cinders when the blast roars through them, and Fondie's pride, burning red-hot, threatened to consume all the sad ashes of respect that so persistently smothered it. The young gentleman championed Fondie's aspirations with a generosity that visibly affected the wheelwright's son. In return for Fondie's organship and technical advice the young gentleman would teach Fondie anything within his power that Fondie sought to learn. He would teach him Greek and Latin if he wished. They were hateful languages both, but the young gentleman thought he would find them infinitely more pleasant to teach than to learn. The fact that they were dead languages contributed in no small degree to Fondie's veneration of them—more particularly when the young gentleman interpreted with tolerable facility the epitaph in *issimus*, *issimi* and *issimae* that commemorated the virtues of the extinct vicar, and explained the significance of these sibilant terminations. Nevertheless, all things considered, Fondie opined that such august dead tongues were not for one in his walk of life, and that time expended over learning what nobody else about him could understand mud be (in a manner o' speaking, sir) thrown away. But those other studies related more nearly to the living languages with which, as he confessed, he was all too imperfectly acquainted, appealed less resistibly to his ambitions and desires.

Putting his passion for Blanche and all its train of possibilities and consequences apart, he had always experienced a longing to read and write his native language as she should respectively be writ and spoken—to the end that he might imbibe knowledge at first sight from its printed source,

and possess himself of an efficient verbal implement for his thoughts.

"There's things comes inti my head at times, sir," he admitted, "that I couldn't express ti onnybody, for lack o' knowing how. Things I'd like ti say, and yet lacks tongue ti say 'em wi'. You won't know what that means, sir, and I misdoot I can't explain it to ye onny better than what I'se done."

The young gentleman, on the contrary, knew quite well what it meant, and knew, moreover, the remedy. It was an English grammar, which he placed unreservedly at Fondie Bassiemoor's disposal, with the further undertaking to explain any doubtful points which Fondie, in the course of his studies, might find in it.

"I'se jealous all grammars i' the world, sir," Fondie reflected, "can't mek a gentleman o' me. Miss Blanche would want ti look a deal higher than me. It's only right she should. Even if she'd condescend i' the course o' time ti have me, I misdoot for her own sake I shouldn't ought ti encourage her. I should only be helping ti pull her doon. Wi' syke as you, sir," Fondie added, "case would be altered. You mud aspire ti onnybody."

The young gentleman hurriedly interposed:

"No, no. She doesn't think anything about me, really. I'm not strong and manly-looking like you. I know she cares for you. I'm sure she does. You could soon make her care for you if you liked to try."

"Wi' you it wouldn't need ti be case o' trying a deal, sir," Fondie reflected. "I'se fit ti think you've caught Miss Blanche's fancy wi'oot trying. A word or look frev you, sir, would gan as far as a score o' mine, and it's nobbut ti be expected they should. I'se best ti try and keep mysen respectful. It's what I'se allus been used ti, sir, and if I once let go o' that there's no knowing where I may find mysen i' end. . . ."

He added: ". . . Next time young lady offers ye onnything,

sir, I'se jealous you'd best tek it wi'oot considering me. She'd think none the better o' me, I misdoot, if she knew what I'd cost her again pond the other afternoon."

XLVI

A GAIN the young gentleman resisted Fondie Bassie-moor's chivalrous surrender with equal magnanimity and a rapid "No, no," saying he had not made Blanche's acquaintance until long after Fondie had known her, and he had never thought of her in Fondie's way until he saw how Fondie thought of her.

"And besides . . ." he said, lowering his voice that had recently shown a disposition to rise above the original level of church decorum agreed upon by both, ". . . it is impossible. For me. I cannot . . . I could not. . . . I want to tell you something," he imparted to the submissive Fondie, "something I have wanted to tell you for a long time—almost from the first. It is a secret. Can you keep a secret? I know you can. I'm sure you can. I would like to share it with some friend—with you. May I?"

Fondie said—what the young gentleman, or any second-standard scholar in the Whivle school might have expected him to say—that he was humbly grateful for the token of the young gentleman's confidence, though he misdooted he did not deserve it.

"I was hoping you'd ask me," the young gentleman explained. "But you never did. You never do. When I told you this afternoon we had been to Mersham on Saturday you only said, 'Indeed.' I thought for a moment you said that as though you suspected something—but then I thought not. Did you?"

Fondie said: "I should be sorry ti suspect you of onnything, sir, after marks o' consideration you've shown me. . . ." And

the young gentleman remarked: "No, I'm sure you didn't. I thought perhaps you might have asked me why we had walked to Mersham. Blanche did. I told her I didn't know. She said it was a silly walk, and there was nothing to do when you got there. She preferred the Green Lane. Which is the Green Lane?"

"Maybe you won't know it, sir," Fondie answered. "And I misdoot I can't very well describe it to ye wi'oot we step outside porch."

The young gentleman said "Never mind!" to the latter suggestion and asked Fondie if he knew Mersham.

"I know it i' sense of having been there a time or two, sir," Fondie replied. "And I can remember looking inti some o' windows once when bricklayer was at wark on roof. It's a strange big, noble place, sir, as no doubt you'd see for yourself. One can't help but feel sorry ti think syke a grand place should 'a been wasted, as you mud say. She was kept i' wonderful fittle i' Sir Lancelot's time, by what my feythur says."

"My name's Lancelot, too," the young gentleman vouchsafed in a significant voice, and Fondie's comment was: "Indeed, sir. Onnybody mud know it was a real gentleman's name by sound on it."

"My grandfather says Mersham belongs to me," the young gentleman confided. "He says it is mine by right."

That Fondie Bassiemoor had no conception of the value of a climax was sufficiently attested by the fact of his contributing a second "Indeed, sir," to this prodigious piece of information; in a voice not very different from the first; a respectful, placid, and submissive voice that did not even suffer emotions of sudden surprise to disturb it into any accent approaching wonder. His acquiescence in the imparted confidence was so implicit and complete that the young gentleman appeared to entertain a doubt whether such unconditional assent could be assent at all, and asked, as though the point had been disputed:

"Don't you believe it?"

"I believe it if you say it is, sir," Fondie answered. "Aud gentleman would be very like ti know. I'se jealous he knows most things, sir, by looks on him."

Complete though this assurance was, such an unquestioning surrender of faith to human authority failed to conform to the full standard of the young gentleman's satisfaction, for he said after a moment, with perhaps a slight tincture of disappointment audible in his voice for the lack of reassuring doubt in Fondie's, "You don't say what you think."

"Why, sir," Fondie explained, "I misdoot it dizn't beseeem me ti think onnything, except that yon's a grand spot ti belong onnybody. Maybe, if I'd been asked, sir, I should 'a said Mersham belonged somebody else—I'd an idea she did—but you won't need ti be telt I'se better pleased she dizn't."

He added: "I hope she'll continue ti be yours for a long time to come, sir; and aud gentleman may be spared many a year ti enjoy place wi' ye. There's nobody would wish that more than me, sir."

Once again the implicit assumption of Fondie Bassiemoor's faith in the young gentleman's confidence, and his modest gratification in the young gentleman's good fortune, caused the latter a certain degree of embarrassment.

"Of course Mersham doesn't belong to me now," he hastened to explain.

"It maybe will do some day, sir," Fondie encouraged him.

"I don't know." The self-declared claimant shook his gentlemanly head. "Sometimes I think it never will. Sometimes . . ."—a certain current of bitterness and despondency crept into his voice and mingled with those clearly regulated tones that Fondie loved so well to listen to; the limpid stream of speech in which his hearing, as it were, bathed itself delectably with a sense of cleansing and refreshment, emerging with a comfortable glow of stimulated endeavor and imperfections healed—"sometimes I even hope it never will. Sometimes I feel just what Blanche feels when she says everything is sick-

ening. At times everything is. It's like a dream. I suppose it's true."

"Why, I'se fit ti think it will be," Fondie tried to reassure him. "Aud gentleman wouldn't seek ti tell ye onnything else."

"And yet . . . often I wish it wasn't. More than ever since we came here and I've got to know you. I wish he could find out that it was all wrong, all a mistake—and would let me be just like other people."

"Why, for the matter of that, sir," Fondie told him, with gentle consolation, "other people's got troubles o' their own, just same. Gentlefolk has a lot ti put up with, I know, sir—and very like they feel 'em keener. I expect it teks as mich hard work ti be a gentleman and act up tiv it as ti be onnything else, and maybe more. But I misdoot you couldn't bide being onnything else very well—and onnything not so good—efter once you'd been a gentleman, sir. I'se jealous we're what we are, and we tek a deal o' changing ti be any different."

The young gentleman subscribed to the doctrine of the intransmutability of human nature, less after the fashion of a complete assentient than as one whose mind carried too many burdens to engage in discussion by the way. He understood Fondie's meaning, which, however, he qualified with a "but," and having qualified, no longer considered. All his life, he said—or all the rememberable part of it at least—he had been governed by this legend of gentility. Unlike Fondie, he had known no father whose wise authority he might now revere, or mother whose love, once enjoyed, he might cherish. Both parents had passed out of his world while yet its horizons were restricted to the walls and windows of that infant wailing-place, the nursery. The bones of his father, long since scattered from their perished shroud, strewed the deep ooze of distant waters. The father's eyes had never rested on his son, and his mother's eyes were dimming fast for death when they did so and hands held out to her the precious heritage that was to bear the name of Lancelot. Lancelot, with the other names

he bore, had been his grandfather's choice, and always and only (so it seemed) the steel-gray eye had been the witness of his griefs and growth, and the waxen ear the sole receptacle of such confidences as it discouraged him from pouring into it. And ever and always, circumscribing all his instincts and ruling all his longings, he had been brought up in the strictest faith of orthodox gentility. Mersham was his rightful home as surely as Heaven—in Bless Allcot's theology—was created for the heritage of repentant sinners. And like its religious prototype, this creed (he confided to Fondie) tended to grow chill and meaningless; a mere formula without the fervor necessary to warm and animate the limbs of faith. Now and again he decided to espouse it with all his force and passion, as the easiest way of making a tyranny supportable. At such times of willful conversion, he saw himself already inheritor of Mersham; all his faith rewarded; his aspirations fulfilled; his sacrifices compensated. Then, under the vision splendid, he could fling himself into the gentlemanly studies that the maternal grandfather imposed on him; into the Greek and into the Latin, and into such higher branches of learning as would be requisite to matriculate him in the University after the way befitting a gentleman. After that, faith's sinews flagging under the protracted tension, the young gentleman sank back into the discontented and unworthy frame of mind that sought immediate pleasures, and such joys as were the present possession of the vulgar, and earned the deep reproaches of a grandparent whose goodness he acknowledged without exactly appreciating. He admitted the delinquency to Fondie, and owned—almost with Fondie's character of frankness—his inability to requite such goodness as it deserved.

"He says I have no proper pride. I suppose I haven't. I ought to remember who I am. Perhaps I ought. He says I ought to have no inclination to mix with . . . with common people. I don't mean you."

"But then," the young gentleman continued, in the fullness

of his confession, ". . . what's the use? He'd have me write out genealogies all day. I'm sick of genealogies and pedigrees. What good is the Duke of Abercrombie's genealogy and coat of arms to me? I've done it scores of times, and all the other dukes as well. I was doing it that day you came to mend the pump. So big"—he indicated the size with extended hands—"on a drawing-board." He drew for Fondie a minute and vivid picture of all his labors in this heraldic field under the old gentleman's direction. In the old house, it appeared, were cupboardfuls of notebooks crowded with almost undecipherable entries in his grandfather's crabbed hand: dates of births and deaths and marriages; mural epitaphs and inscriptions from tombstones; extracts from church registers, packed away with bales of letters from all sorts of sources—from lawyers, clergymen, parish clerks, heraldic offices, and genealogical agents. He recalled tedious hours spent in sacred buildings, spelling out, letter by letter, inscriptions that his grandfather's failing sight could not decipher; subsequently making clear copies of these at home; entering and re-entering them innumerable times in innumerable books, in all sorts of conjunctions, and under all sorts of classifications. There was not a date on any gravestone or cenotaph or tomb but his grandfather took note of it, saying it might cast light upon some other date that the young gentleman had grown sick of months before. Already they had spent two whole days at Mersham, occupied in the same pursuit, and now his grandfather talked of going again, and taking the big magnifying glass for a closer scrutiny of the church register. His grandfather was not satisfied that some of the entries had not been tampered with. Of course that was a strict secret. Fondie must not breathe a word.

. . . Still, the young gentleman admitted with some comfort that his grandparent was less exacting than once upon a time he had been. In which respect he compared him to Fondie's father. Perhaps for a whole month the books and bales of correspondence would lie undisturbed and no word of geneal-

ogies would be mentioned. And then, all at once, the old gentleman would say they were neglecting their duty and letting all their opportunities slide by; and the bales of letters would be brought and released from their pink tape, and the table would be piled up with the accumulated correspondence of years. And he would catechize the young gentleman upon the facts of his descent and its chronology; and when the young gentleman was at loss (as not infrequently, he confessed, he was) for the name of some remote heiress in a collateral branch, or the date of her marriage and death, the old gentleman would shake his head and say that all his labor had been wasted, and all the hundreds and hundreds of pounds expended in his grandson's interest thrown away, and the sacrifices of a lifetime made void, and this was his reward—just as Blanche's father did when he discovered a *Sunday Sacred* secreted in the action of the vicarage piano. It seemed there was a curious similarity between fathers and grandfathers the world over.

"Sometimes I have seen tears in his eyes," the young gentleman confessed to Fondie in a voice of deep contrition. "That made me feel frightful. I worked ever so hard after that." He tried to explain to Fondie the precise nature of his claim to Mersham, and the defect in the legitimacy of the early issue of Sir Matthew Holderness, Kt. (1665), through whom the present holder had successfully established his title, and Fondie listened with respect and humility, saying he misdooted it wasn't for syke as him to understand syke matters, but so far as he mud venture ti express an opinion, the estate ought never ti 'a passed inti hands it had, sir. The young gentleman, gratified by the unmistakable sincerity that colored Fondie's diffidence, said, "You really think so?"

Fondie answered, "I do, sir." And just as the young gentleman's bright optimism on Fondie's behalf had caused Fondie's confidence to shrink like an eye in the sunlight, so Fondie's allegiance made the young gentleman's faith waver. He did not know. He wondered. He doubted. It was all dim,

remote, and sickening. But if it turned out true at last, and one day he came into his rightful own, he would never forget Fondie—never. When Mersham came to be his and he came to be his own master, Mersham would always be open to Fondie. Such an ebullition of friendship from the wells of the young gentleman's heart so softened Fondie's own that he could only say "Thank you, sir . . ." in a voice noticeably unsteady.

And in that day, the young gentleman pointed out, when he should be at Mersham, and Fondie should have mastered the elements of English grammar and other studies beside, and made himself worthy of Blanche (though he was worthy of her now, in the young gentleman's opinion), Blanche would think differently of Fondie, and all would be well. For the young gentleman's part, his future—in this connection—was unsure. He would probably have to marry somebody in his own station, for whom he cared nothing. That was one of the stern duties too frequently imposed upon a gentleman. His grandfather had told him so.

Meanwhile, by dint of more organ and talks of Blanche, and pledges of unswerving friendship (which Fondie misdoctored very much he ought not to suffer himself to give) and vows of secrecy on both sides, they worked the climax of the afternoon to a fine pitch of optimism and enthusiastic sentiment.

"So it is agreed," the young gentleman said at the church gate, and Fondie said if the young gentleman wished it, it was; and the young gentleman shook Fondie's hand with the big brown key in it, and they went their ways: the young gentleman at a nimble running pace; Fondie at a more sober and meditative gait, with Dr. Ezra Blenkinson beneath his arm, filled with a curious elation—as though, for very little, he might have soared into the air balloon-wise, levitated by his own hopes; and yet held down to earth by the weight of curious perplexities, asking if he were he, and if this that

walked with Dr. Ezra Blenkinson beneath his arm were really Fondie Bassiemoor, the wheelwright's son; and if these strange disclosures and confidences with which his busy brain abounded belonged veritably to him or to some other; and if the world around him were in sooth stern substance as he had hitherto believed, or the most insubstantial tissue of amorphous fancy, that changed its shape and outward seeming with every variation in the eye that beheld it.

PART II

I

WHEN Time, that black magician and artificer of destinies, can work such speedy wonders that (in Bless Allcot's divinity) a man may be on earth one moment and in Hell or Heaven the next—according to whether he has lived Church of England or Primitive—being settled down in his new quarters a whole post before his relatives can be informed as to what has got him, it might be thought that with the aid of a twelvemonth the aged conjuror would effect such changes in the face of the world as might almost put one year's Whivvle out of the memory of its successor, even allowing for that slower rate of chronology which, in the opinion of Blanche Bellwood and many others, is held to prevail in the country, where clocks are said to tick without stirring a hand for time's advancement, and nothing ever happens, and everything is perpetually sickening, which is the reason that all self-respecting people go to live in Hunmouth.

But though this accusation is not altogether just, and men die as quickly in the country as elsewhere, and take no longer in being born, and Reuben Halliday's chimney that had been accounted tottering for years blew down in a single night—just as any city chimney might do; and every acre under tillage changes annually from seeds to wheat and wheat to fallow, so that no two succeeding summers are ever alike, but as different as can be; and momentous changes are writ everywhere, on every hand, though because they are writ in the small print of nature, and not in the magnified headlines dear to journalism, many people lack the skill or patience to read them—never-

theless, though Time seemed to have forgotten Whivle, and last year's calendar might have served for the year that followed, with small confusion, and the wheelwright's yard had changed so little that people who had not seen it all the intervening twelvemonth might know it at once again for the same yard, and the wheelwright's beard was the same beard—nevertheless, impartial Time had moved strictly in accordance with the almanac and solar system, and bestowed birthdays in Whivle as elsewhere, so that Fondie was nineteen and Blanche all within a month of seventeen, as she had been all within a month of sixteen when she climbed over the old house wall.

So Blanche being now on the verge of seventeen, her education automatically completed itself, and next term ceased to be talked about or to have significance where Blanche was concerned. The Vicar, shaking his head, deplored that his daughter had made no better use of the educational advantages so liberally bestowed upon her, but it was too late to deplore that now. He had done his best—more than his best, considering his small means and all the sacrifices that his best entailed. He had done his duty. If his children had failed to do theirs the matter must rest in higher hands. Some day, he prophesied with Biblical intensity, his daughter would bitterly regret the misuse of her own time and of her father's goodness. The intermittent music lessons ceased as well, for, as the Vicar said, what was there to justify the spending of his hard-earned money in this direction when he never saw any return for it? Besides, he would shortly be faced with heavy expenses in another quarter. Alexis was growing up, and the next term that had been his sister's peculiar property so long—much longer than her father had been able to afford, indeed—must now advert to the Bullocky in earnest. Hitherto Blanche had always been the obstacle to her brother's scholastic advancement. It was out of the question—as the Vicar affirmed—that his slender stipend could support two next terms. Even one imposed, upon the vicarial purse and care, a strain far greater than his children ap-

preciated or their conduct justified. So each one of the Vicar's family had prejudiced, in turn, the progress of the one behind. Blanche's elder brother had cost her one full term at least, since, in the words of her father, it was impossible to do everything, and there was her brother Harold to think of first. And her brother Harold had gone into an accountant's office at last—after playing cricket all summer with the village team whilst his parent thought about him—lured by the prospect of an immediate five shillings a week for the gratification of dawning manly vices. As for Blanche's taking of the organ, the subject died. For Blanche's hostility to church-organship having carried on its campaign in no better cause than that of disinclination, chose dignity at last as her standard; contending that it was not fitting for the Vicar's daughter, at her age, to have such menial work to do. When she was younger it might not have mattered so much. The schoolmaster ought to do it by rights. Other schoolmasters did. If this one couldn't, why didn't her father get one that could?

Also, the same dignity that made it impossible for the Vicar's daughter to play the organ for Sunday worship compelled her to have a bicycle. No decent Vicar's daughter could maintain the respect due to her father's position without a bicycle. When Blanche (Blanche said) was forced to admit she had no bicycle, people laughed at her. This means of locomotion had long been a point of dispute between the Vicar and his daughter, Blanche declaring she was ashamed to be seen walking out on foot, and the Vicar contending that Blanche would tire of a bicycle the moment he bought one for her, as she had tired of her pianoforte. To which Blanche retorted that it was not *her* pianoforte, and it had not been bought for her, and she had never asked for it, and she did not want it, and people could not ride to Hunmouth and back on a pianoforte, which the Vicar exclaimed he had no desire his daughter should do, since she never went to Hunmouth but that her behavior was the worse for it.

Not that Blanche was ignorant of the principles and practice of the art of cycling. From the earliest days the knowledge had been hers. She had ridden as a passenger poised on steps to almost every Kissing Ring of consequence, and back again; and on the saddle of almost every bicycle, masculine and feminine, in her father's parish, worth the riding. Fondie Bassiemoor's bicycle had always been at her service—to name no other of the many available when she stood in need of fleetier locomotion than her own legs afforded—though, other things being equal, she always preferred Fondie's because nothing was ever said, nor was there any occasion to say anything, if a mudguard were bent or a spoke broken, beyond the most casual allusion to the damage.

Fondie's courtesy always thanked her for having drawn his attention to the matter, as if it had been a service instead of an injury, misdooting with unfailing regularity that spoke or mudguard or brake (whichever it might be) had been (maybe) amiss a long while, and he was only thankful nothing worse had happened onnybody, miss. Fault was his (said he) for having lent machine wi'oot looking her over first, and making sure she was ti trist ti.

Having, on the strength of her anticipated seventeenth birthday, renewed her appeal for a bicycle, and being asked by the Vicar, in a voice of paternal distress for his daughter's utter lack of feeling or of reason, if this were a time to talk about bicycles with next term hanging over his head and Alexis' future to think of, Blanche decided complacently that it was, and commissioned Fondie Bassiemoor to supply her with the best second-hand bicycle obtainable forthwith, in condition equal to new, at any price up to thirty shillings (though cheaper if possible) on the deferred payment system; only regretting she had never thought of this convenient method of doing business before.

The bicycle that Fondie secured at last for Blanche came from the school-teacher of Myton, whose advancement in learn-

ing and salary justified her in the purchase of a machine so precious that it lived in the best parlor along with the Bible and sewing-machine, draped in a dust-sheet. Friends were introduced to look at it and hear the bell, and the blind was raised and the sheet was lifted, and a hush of admiration ensued as if what they gazed at had been a corpse, and when they were gone the school-teacher went back again to lower the blind and rub the marks of their hot hands off the electroplate. For her discarded bicycle Fondie gave the full amount of Blanche's commission, to wit, thirty shillings, so that his margin of profit under the most favorable circumstances could not have been wide. Moreover he turned the bicycle's renovation into such a labor of love, and so took it to pieces and reassembled it, and enameled the frame and mudguards, and re-corded the chain-protector, and aluminum-painted the rims and spokes, that those who had known the bicycle in its scholastic days exclaimed with astonishment:

"Yon's nivver Hopwood lass' bicycle, hooivver!"

Even the wheelwright was stirred to speculation by the sight of its shining parts, though his brow darkened when he learned for what customer it was designed.

"Has thoo gotten money for it?" he asked tersely, and when Fondie answered, "Why, not before bicycle's fittled, feythur!" turned his back on a transaction so futile and profitless.

Nevertheless, the transaction was not so destitute of business principle as the wheelwright deemed. Blanche had had the bicycle less than a week when she came to Fondie in the workshop and put half a crown into his hand, saying that was the first, and she would go on bringing other payments until the bicycle was paid for.

"Don't forget, Fondie. That's half a crown. Don't go and say I haven't paid it."

Not the thirty pieces of silver pressed into Judas' hand could have burned more hell-hot than the coin that Blanche

thus frankly thrust into Fondie's palm. Love, pride, and every emotion that his nature held rose up, outraged and protesting, while his lips uttered their submissive "Thank you, miss." He assured her she needed to have no fear of his forgetfulness, and while the hot emblem still gnawed at the hand that held it, asked, in a husky, surreptitious voice, if the payment "was quite convenient, miss?" Blanche said with engaging candor that it wasn't. "I should be sorry . . ." Fondie began, and weighed the coin openly in his hand as though to let the Vicar's daughter see its transfer was not irrevocable, and that the moment was not yet too late for her to repair this financial indiscretion if she had the mind. "I'se not i' onny particular need of it, miss. Next week, or week after, or any time will suit me so far as that's consarned." Blanche said, "Will it?" and with quick decision, "Well, look here, Fondie. Give me eighteenpence, and let's make the payment a shilling. Do you mind? You know what He is."

So the eighteenpence went back to Blanche and the shilling into Fondie's pocket, and Blanche said: "Now don't forget, Fondie. That's a shilling I've paid you. Don't go and say I haven't." And Fondie said she was to feel no anxiety on that score; and every now and then Blanche would come to tender some further payment on account—shillings and sixpences, and even threepenny-bits. All the money thus received from Blanche went into a small wooden box that Fondie kept piously and solely for the purpose. No other money was allowed to mix with Blanche's sacred currency, for by this expedient he sought to mitigate the indignity of which his love was conscious each time his hand accepted payment of Blanche, and to soften the stern outlines of the mercenary relations between them. At the remote back of his mind, too, was a hope—a frail, pallid, phosphorescent hope like a diluted moonbeam, making any fact it shone on gleam unreal and ghostly; a hope strayed from all restraint of probability—that some day, by thus keeping Blanche's money intact, he might be able to return

it to her, either in its own guise or in some form more consonant with the depth of his affection. And now and again, in adding to this exchequer some crooked sixpence or slapy three-penny-bit that Blanche had paid him—knowing that Fondie would never question any coin that came from her fingers, or put any metal so consecrated to the test of his teeth, or shake his head over it rejectfully, as other people might do—he would gaze at the little treasury of small silver pieces as though they represented the precious particles of Blanche's self. For each one of these financially insignificant coins had come from Blanche; it had nestled in the warm darkness of her comfortable pocket, and even now retained—surely—some vestige of the impress of her fingers. It was a great thought. He thought it often. Though infinitely sad, there was a certain sustaining comfort in it.

II

ONE consequence of Blanche's bicycle—mournfully foreseen by Fondie, yet bowed to with the resignation befitting a decree of Providence—was that Blanche showed herself less within the boundaries of her father's parish.

For, as she demanded of herself and everybody—her father not excepted—"What was there to do in Whivvle?" She supplied her own answer, "There was nothing," and treated to scorn the Vicar's pious apothegm that to those who did their duty there was no place or walk in life but offered them more than a sufficiency to do. Who, said Blanche rebelliously, wanted to do their duty? She was sick of duty. She was sick of doing things that had to be done, and her father said, Ah! it was a pity he had not been firmer with her and given her more of such things to do. The time was coming—he foresaw it—when his daughter would turn round upon him and bitterly reproach his misguided leniency and indulgence. Already he recognized that her age was beyond the bounds of his discipline.

She was what she was; he could not alter her, now, by any process of authority. Less and less did he awaken from his vicarial slumber and gird his loins for righteousness, impounding jewelry and prohibiting hose and reordering the house on strictly Christian principles, with a loud voice and a strong hand. He found it easier to shake his head and say he had done his best. He had tried to bring them up the right way. They must not blame him. They must not blame him when he was gone.

Blanche's further experiments with the young gentleman of the old house had ended in failure. She relegated him to that hopeless limbo for human impracticables to which Fondie Bassiemoor had been long ago consigned. True, she had not suffered him to sink into this terrible abyss without courageous efforts to save, and even to reclaim him; going the length of pointing out the undesirable nature of Fondie Bassiemoor's companionship, and exhorting the young gentleman not to be sickening "like him," and to make himself laughed at—for the young gentleman, under Fondie Bassiemoor's pernicious influence, displayed a horrible tendency to be absurdly truthful and ridiculously conscientious, and (indirectly) to rebuke Blanche for her lack of these vaunted qualities by adducing Fondie Bassiemoor's possession of them, and setting up Fondie Bassiemoor as a standard for the settlement of all ethical difficulties. Blanche took him up the tower on one occasion, when he was at music with Fondie Bassiemoor, invading the church for the particular purpose. So obviously was the young gentleman under Fondie Bassiemoor's influence that at first he actually said he did not want to go, and then asked Fondie, "Shall I? Do you mind?" and only went when Blanche told him, "You needn't come if you don't want. I don't care. I can go with myself. I aren't frightened!" and when Fondie Bassiemoor further recommended him, "Why I'se fit ti think you ought to go and have a look fro' top, sir, if it's fust time you've been. There's a grand view fro' summit, and it's a likely

day for seeing an' all." And even then, demoralized by Fondie's influence and example, he had no more sense of what was fitting for a Vicar's daughter than to invite Fondie to come too, saying, "Let's all go," though Blanche had self-respect and presence of mind enough to veto this at once. "No. What's the good of Fondie coming? Besides, Fondie's been before. Lots of times. Fondie'd rather stay where he is. Wouldn't you, Fondie?" And Fondie said, if they'd be good enough to excuse him, he would, miss. "Ladders is a bit awkward for three."

So the young gentleman went, albeit reluctantly, but his heart did not appear to be in the expedition. All he did, when they came out upon the leads, was to look at the view and ask Blanche questions about the country: whose house this was, and whose house that, and what they called the village over there, at the far end of his finger; and was so little moved to gallantry by Blanche's smile as to be the first to suggest a descent, on no better ground than that Fondie would be waiting. He seemed dismayed at the levity with which Blanche retorted, "Let him wait. He's used to waiting," in a voice as unconcerned as if she had been speaking of her own father, and not of the paragon of all virtues.

Uneventfully they descended the steep and dust-velveted ladder to the little worm-eaten door at the foot of the tower, beneath the organ-loft, and the young gentleman—regardless of all etiquette in such cases—would have been prepared to step into the nave without a thought if Blanche had not caught him by the hand, saying, "Stop!" and restrained him from an act of precipitation so disrespectful to a vicar's daughter. The young gentleman, though his color rose, inquired, "What for?" Blanche said, "Nothing. What did you think?" As the young gentleman appeared to have no thought upon the subject that Blanche could discover, but quietly reclaimed his hand, Blanche hastily unscrewed a ring of dazzling emeralds and brilliants from her third finger and told him in a lowered,

more urgent voice, "Here. Take this." Again the young gentleman showed his ignorance of local usage by looking at the ring as well as the gloom within the little doorway would let him and asking, "Why?"

"To wear, of course," Blanche told him. "Until we meet next time. Like this. See? Give us your hand."

And she took his dubious but unresisting hand again and tried the ring upon its fingers, one after the other. Upon such slender digits it slipped with perilous insecurity, to be sure, but Blanche said the fingers would swell if he held his hand down and let the blood come into it. The young gentleman, however, thought otherwise; and taking off the ring confided to him returned it to Blanche with the fear expressed that perhaps he might lose it. Blanche said, "What if you do? I don't care. I've plenty more." Even this sweeping assurance failed to reconcile the young gentleman to the sense of responsibility imposed by the guerdon, for he said he would rather not. He would be sorry to lose the ring. "Ask Mr. Bassiemoor to wear it for you. He has much stronger fingers."

"Him!" exclaimed Blanche with a voice of scorn. "Why are you always throwing him at me? He's nothing to do with me."

And as the young gentleman betrayed a disposition to extol Fondie Bassiemoor's virtues somewhat exorbitantly, Blanche tendered the advice, "Don't you go and make yourself as bad as him, for goodness' sake." She deplored the young gentleman's growing proclivity for the organ, which she regarded as a bad sign, and predicted that no good would come of it. "Whatever do you want to play a fusty old organ for?" She hated organs. She hated the very sound of them. They were sickening. Walks, on such a day as this, were infinitely to be preferred. She suggested—with an amazing shamelessness that took the young gentleman's breath away, "Let's go for a walk now. Come on. And leave him. He'll never notice. He'll be all right. He'll shut up at tea-time." Such an audacious

proposition of disloyalty brought the young gentleman back to the sense of his own immediate obligations, and he said now he really must be going.

Deeming that this attempt to rescue the young gentleman from the perils confronting him owed much of its fruitlessness to the direct personal influence of Fondie, Blanche invited him to accompany her on some other occasion—"When he isn't there. Just the two of us. Come on"; adding in a reproachful tone: "You can go to church alone to meet him. Why can't you come to church to meet me? Don't you want to? You can tell me if you don't. I aren't frightened of being told. I don't care. There are other places I can go to, with other people."

And to these other places, with these other people, she ultimately went, for the influence of Fondie Bassiemoor deepened perceptibly over the young gentleman of the old house, to such extent that Blanche never seemed able to meet the young gentleman nowadays alone—even when they came upon each other unaccompanied. Always the specter of Fondie Bassiemoor appeared to stand by the young gentleman's elbow, or to look out of the young gentleman's eyes; and the young gentleman's lips uttered what they had to say as though with a hesitating reference to Fondie Bassiemoor's lips, and the name and virtues of Fondie Bassiemoor were sickeningly and perpetually in his mouth. He could scarcely sustain Blanche's company for a minute but he must introduce this over-familiar name, asking Blanche if she had seen Mr. Bassiemoor of late—as though Blanche wanted to see him—and paying tribute to Fondie's estimable qualities, which of all Fondie's qualities she least wanted to be bothered with. For Blanche did not seek to be trammelled with ideals and ethical abstractions, and the dry *caput mortuum* of the conscience. Blanche sought flesh and blood, and the companionship of human peccadillos and ebullient materiality like her own. Conscience only darkened life and shrouded the sun, and truth and constancy and all the

sickening ideals of duty were (for the Vicar's smileful daughter) but dismal curtains drawn over the sunlit windows of the heart.

III

THE year that had wrought so few changes in the outward features of the place he lived in had wrought (it seemed to Fondie) infinitely fewer in the region of his own mind. He was, for all that the closest introspection could reveal to him, disappointingly the selfsame Fondie of the year before; filled with the selfsame faults and imperfections, and those futile aspirations that sought to remove them. And for all that he had applied himself diligently to the study of syntax and orthography during the twelvemonth, he seemed no nearer to kissing Blanche than before, and there appeared singularly little in the pages of the young gentleman's much-inked and dog-eared grammar to show him how it should be done. Even the young gentleman was puzzled—and, if the truth be told, somewhat disappointed—at his pupil's lack of success in this romantic field; for frequently the conversation between him and the wheelwright's son turned upon the theme of Blanche, and if Fondie mentioned having been in her company he would fix his eye on Fondie and ask in a confidential and momentous voice, "Did you . . .?" or "Have you . . .?" and Fondie would assume a look befitting failure and misdoot he didn't or he hadn't, 'sir. It had come into his head (sir), he would confess, but moment hadn't seemed favorable. Perhaps the meeting had taken place in the workshop at the end of the wheelwright's yard, whither (it may have been) Blanche had journeyed to tender one of her trepid instalments for the bicycle, in the hope that Fondie might say it didn't matter, and he would be sorry for her to put herself about, miss; and any time would do.

"I'se jealous you wouldn't say that was a moment I ought tiv 'a chosen, sir."

To which the young gentleman would subscribe a dubious "No."

But wherever the meeting had taken place, the conjunction of time and circumstance and Fondie's state of mind had never been propitious. And he misdooted that grammer didn't look like doing him a deal of good in young lady's eyes, sir. Harmonium hadn't. First she said he was all hymns and psalm-tunes, and now (said the young lady) he was all nouns and verbs. She asked him what he wanted to bother his head with grammar for—"Nobody makes you"—which, as Fondie confided to the faithful partner of his aspirations, "was a question I couldn't very well reply to, sir, wi'oot speaking truth, and I'se jealous she would nobbut 'a laughed at that."

If Fondie had only taken the Devil's oft-repeated counsel at this juncture he would have forsworn the demoralizing company of subjects and predicates and substantival clauses and sought some straighter, surer cut to Blanche's favor. He needed no better pathway to her good graces, indeed, than his own sunny, though mistrusted smile. But in much earnest conference with the young gentleman it had been decided that, above all, Fondie must win the Vicar's daughter by the romantic and desperate expedient of making himself worthy of her—which is the last resource of uncourageous lovers, and certainly the last way in the world that Blanche Bellwood sought to be won, either by Fondie Bassiemoor or any other.

So, deliberately forsaking the easy and pleasant path that the Devil pointed out to him with obliging fore-finger, Fondie discarded all the natural armor with which Providence had endowed him for conquest in the jousts of love, and traveled as a pilgrim over those rugged and precipitous ways that all fanatics and the foolish tread who seek to reach love by way of the higher purpose. Fondie found it easier to aspire after knowledge than to attain it, and if the book that the young

gentleman lent him made some things plain, it made a multitude exceedingly obscure, like a lamp flashed in the eye of him who would see by it. He confessed to the young gentleman that he misdooted he had taen up book-larning ower-late in life, and that instead of diminishing his imperfections it only served to show him how many there were, besides being a source of constant vexation to his father, on whose account (Fondie was jealous) he ought to give the reading habit up. "My feythur," said he, "is not a young man, sir. I misdoot I ought to respect his wishes, few years longer he has ti live. Book vexes him. Maybe he sees folly on it better than me. He says larning has spoiled as many men as drink." The wheelwright, in effect, said infinitely more than this, though Fondie's filial deference made no chronicle of it. The sight of Fondie's concentrated forehead supported on Fondie's two hands when Fondie pored over book and paper on the kitchen table at such times as no more private and convenient place was available roused the wheelwright's infinite disgust, and so wrought on him that he demanded (though not of Fondie, deeming direct appeal to such a source beneath the dignity of his years and beard, but of his daughter, to whom he addressed the question indirectly, in order that its shaft of sarcasm might be more barbed) :

"Wha's amiss wi' him? Has he ower-eaten hissen?"

"Naught's amiss wi' him that I know on," Fondie's sister would reply, "though summut soon will be at this rate. Much good asking him anything. Forever set reading book."

"Book!" exclaimed the wheelwright. "Hasn't he done wi' books, time o' life he's gotten ti? He'll gan back ti bottle next, and expect thee ti feed him."

"More he reads, less he knows," Fondie's sister affirmed with the subacidulated voice which usually characterized her when at home. "Ask him if he knows how anybody is, and whether doctor's callin' still, and see what answer you'll get."

"Not me," cried the wheelwright contemptuously. "I wean't ask him onnything aboot onnybody."

"Nice company he is for folk, ti be sure," Fondie's sister complained. "Grate cleaned up and kitchen sided and cloth on table, an him wi' his nose stuck i' yon book and nought ti say for hissen. One mud set here all night and larn nothing."

By this process of venting mutual acrimonies father and daughter would sometimes colloquize and be amicably at one, though it was a point of principle with the wheelwright never to engage with his daughter, or with anybody else, in any agreeable topic. Subjects calling for mere amenities or friendliness were beneath his manly dignities and beard. But when the conversation reached a stage of rancor or acerbity he could enter in and take his part without any compromise of dignity or principle. Fondie, on his side, never complained; never protested. He offered, indeed, to put the book out of his father's sight if it offended, but the wheelwright—with the habitual perversity that declined to be propitiated by the least concession to it—said, Not him. He would put the book out of sight for himself, nobbut Fondie left it in his road; and, as Fondie's mother said: "Thoo knaws thy feythur's way. Tek ni notice. Say nowt ti vex him."

Not alone, however, did Fondie meet with opposition to this new culture of the best in him in his father's kitchen. There were difficulties to be confronted abroad as well as at home. To parade his aspirates before the face of his fellow-men, putting as much punctilious breath before the words requiring it as would blow out his candle at bedtime, cost more of Fondie's courage than many could conceive. The act took as much doing as the saying of one's prayers in public, and to Fondie savored as much of a lack of nice feeling as to flaunt money before the eyes of an insolvent, or to eat with gusto before the gaze of the unfed. When Fondie tried to say "home" for the first time in the place defined by the word, after the manner

demonstrated by the young gentleman and piously rehearsed to pattern in the chancel, he was two whole days before he could bring himself to a task exacting so much from his fortitude, and when at last he screwed up his courage to pronounce the word (though in a self-consciously modified form, and with the least quantity of breath that would blow it) he dropped his eyes as if he had confessed a crime, and blushed like a lobster. The house roof did not collapse in the terrible pause that followed, as he had feared it might; nor was his father struck to stone in his chair, as Fondie's apprehensions partly expected, but the wheelwright demanded with intolerance, "What's thoo say? Diz thoo mean yam?" And Fondie's sister exclaimed, "Lawks-a-massy, we are growing grand! We shan't know folk after awhile." And Fondie's self was as remorseful as could be, and said he misdooted he meant ti say "awm"—(Why didn't he, then? the wheelwright demanded. Neabody hindered him!)—but the other word had slipped out unbeknown. He'd gotten it fro' young gentleman. And his father admonished him: "What belongs him dizzn't belong thee. Thoo's a wheelwright, or should be. Thoo's thy living ti get. Thoo can't wear his troosers. Thoo's n' occasion ti put on his manners that wasn't intended for thee."

All these doubts and difficulties were duly laid by Fondie before the young gentleman, and the young gentleman, whilst admitting they had a certain relevancy, did not regard them as insuperable. "It seems, sir," Fondie told him with a certain despondency, "one can't mek oneself better i' one respect wi'oot mekking oneself warse i' another. Sin' I started wi' harmonium, and of late wi' grammar, I'se jealous I'se not been si obedient ti my feythur as I ought tiv 'a been, or so considerate ti folk about me. There's mony a time I'se shut mysen up selfish-like wi' book, when maybe I mud 'a used time ti do a bit o' good for somebody else." He misdooted that it couldn't make a deal of difference to his sister whatever way he spoke, and he confessed the justness of her reproach that asked him

what was the good of folk larning ti say things the right way in order to say nothing? Rough speech (sir) had served his father all his life, and made him a better wheelwright than Fondie could ever hope to be; and it seemed now as if he were setting himself up above his father when he rejected his father's speech and applied himself to learn a better. "It's a small thing ti gie up, sir," he confided; "an' maybe I should be easier i' my mind if I fell in wi' my feythur's wishes. If anything was ti happen him sudden noo, I knaw I should reproach myself."

But the young gentleman would hear of no renunciation of the sort. He said that Fondie was far too self-sacrificing; far too generous and submissive. He had never encountered anybody so amazingly unselfish before. But this quality of unselfishness ought to have its limits. Fondie—the young gentleman was of opinion—ought to assert himself more. People misunderstood modesty, and took advantage of it. "*She* does." And the young gentleman exhorted Fondie to persevere and to assert himself, and to give over respecting those people who did not respect him. Mainly owing to the young gentleman's influence Fondie began to shake off his instinctive disposition to misdoot, which by degrees he did scarcely at all in the young gentleman's company, and only reserved this form of dubiety for the benefit of customers of long standing, and such familiars as would have noted the discontinuance of the habit. And similarly Fondie made compromises with the English tongue in public, and became to all intents and purposes bilingual. In the church, or elsewhere, he spoke to the young gentleman of "harmonium" and "home" and "Hunmouth," and said "I am, sir," and "Were you, sir?" in a voice of polite correctness; whereas in public he systematically dropped one h in every three out of consideration for his hearers' feeling, and said "I misdoot" and "I'se fit ti think" and "nobbut" and "jealous," as before. Nevertheless, signs of aspirations in a dual sense were sufficiently apparent in him—howsoever mod-

estly mitigated—as to give rise to a legend in Whivvle that Fondie Bassiemoor was trying to larn himself into a gentleman by means of books; and jocund customers, going into the wheelwright's yard, would feign surprise at seeing Fondie in his blue drill breeches: "What! Is thoo at wark still, Fondie? I thought thoo was retired, like."

Not that Fondie minded. The man who can bear to be laughed, at is already half heroic, and Fondie had the young gentleman's friendship to sustain him against all the jibes of thoughtlessness and envy. One good opinion prized can arm the spirit against a host of bad, and render even modesty invulnerable. The word "friendship," to be sure, was not of Fondie's choosing, and he would have been the last to presume upon the use of such a sacred term, but the young gentleman—in the realm of their own confidence—would accept no substitute, overruling Fondie's modest objections, and telling him, "I don't want you to respect me; at least, when we are alone. Perhaps you'd better when he's there. I want you to be friends." To which end he demurred at Fondie's insistence on the addressive "sir," though he assented reluctantly to Fondie's submission that the term was as short and handy as any (sir) and there didn't seem a deal of other words left him to choose from.

The weekly meetings at the church suffered less interruption as time went on, and the young gentleman's presence in the wheelwright's yard became quite customary. He even entered into discourse with the proprietor of the formidable beard, and though the beard's principles throughout life had been, and still were, to express no gratification at anything—except, perhaps, at the tidings of somebody's else disaster, which the beard would pronounce a judgment—it knew a gentleman when it saw one as well as Fondie did, and returned "Good day" to this one's salutation with such comparative promptitude that any eye-witness aware of Joe Bassiemoor's habit in these matters would have said he was almost glad to see the visitor—if it

could ever have been credited that the wheelwright was glad to see anybody.

Time, too, that brought the young gentleman into closer acquaintance with the wheelwright's yard—where he did his best to remove the stigma of his white hands—brought Fondie Bassiemoor (through the medium of broken window-cords and defective door-snecks) into closer relation with the old house. It was not very long, indeed, before he came to occupy something approaching the nature of a fiduciary and confidential position toward both inmates, and even the steel eye and the waxen ear—within the entrenched limits of their august reserve—showed him decided tokens of condescension and favor, encouraged thereto by Fondie's air of unspoilable respect, and declared him to be an honest fellow and a conscientious workman. The young gentleman, moreover, gave Fondie special instruction touching his grandfather's idiosyncrasies, being at no small pains to teach him the proper modulation of voice for intercourse with the obdurate ear, so that by degrees the ear obtruded itself less and less when Fondie spoke to it, dispensing ultimately with all use of the hand, and the old gentleman could hear what Fondie modestly communicated without betraying the least pain in his forehead.

It came to pass, therefore, that in all matters pertaining to the old house, both within doors and without, Fondie was consulted, and the most trifling matters of repair were utilized by the young gentleman as a text for calling at the wheelwright's yard to invoke the aid of his peculiar friend. Even the old gentleman was not so crucified to a principle of exclusiveness as to be indifferent to the opportunities of listening to his own voice that Fondie's presence provided, and once the fact of Fondie's unfailing deference was fixed, he showed a disposition to discourse augustly on the subjects dear to his heart, such as the significance of heraldic emblems and the rules of blazonry and the distinction of houses and the different sorts of arms with the signification in their bearers—to all of which Fondie

paid a willing and respectful attention. And the young gentleman, after Fondie was gone, confided to his grandfather how impressed Fondie had been with his grandfather's learning and his wealth of knowledge, and imputed a score of improvised tributes to Fondie, whereat the old gentleman dissembled his gratification under cloak of deducing a lesson from the interest in higher knowledge evinced by the wheelwright's son; saying it should be an example to Lancelot, and he ought to be ashamed that he made so little use of his own advantages. Which, in regard to the harmonium and musical attainment, represented almost identically the line of reproach that the Vicar had been wont to take up against his daughter. Only, in the young gentleman's case, the rebuke no longer fell upon indifferent ears. Out of the depths of his desire to preserve this friendship unthreatened, he accepted the lesson without demur, and did his best to show his grandfather that the good seed of Fondie Bassiemoor's example had not fallen on infructile soil, and that Fondie Bassiemoor's influence was an influence for good. Inspired by which incentive the young gentleman threw himself into the pursuit of learning, and pored over Greek and wrestled with Latin hexameters, and emblazoned coats of arms, and drew out enormous pedigrees on a scale of six inches to the mile, and transferred birth and burial figures from one book to another with the industry of a defaulting cashier.

IV

ALL this while the great hall at Mersham, with its shutters drawn and its blinds lowered, reflected the sun and cloud from its sightless windows, staring out expressionless upon the park like a blind man across the pages of his Braille Bible in the moments when he thinks no likely sympathizer watches. The miles of drive, strewn religiously in Sir Lancelot's time with tons of the finest seaside gravel, and

horse-raked north, south, east and west each morning to a flawless surface for the steel-shod wheels of the baronet's coach and of the elegant chariots of the county to inscribe their signatures upon, relapsed into mere roads of utility, fretted with the deep ruts of the tree feller's wagons that creaked beneath the burdens of prone elm and prostrate oak in the damp and soggy days of winter. From time to time odd bands of workmen scaled the hall roof and smoked pipes in the friendly shelter of its chimneys, enjoying the extended view; plumbers and glaziers and bricklayers whom Rumor, catching sight of—and quick at conclusions—translated into portents that the great house was to be occupied at last, and ran about the countryside claiming credit for the tidings, asserting the very date on which the Mersham glories should be revived. But since the day when Sir Lancelot, wrapped in lead and paneled in mahogany, had been pushed to rest upon the marble shelf in the massive mausoleum his own augustness had caused to be constructed in the family burial-ground attached to the churchyard, no glory worth the name had reanimated Mersham, nor had anything of consequence transpired within the purview of the hall to make it raise its perpetually lowered eyelids and unseal more than half a dozen of its windows at one time. The hall appeared to slumber in its own memories, and took no more account of external things than the dead Sir Lancelot did. Picnic parties, by kind permission, made festive rings around their victual-basket beneath the shelter of the big trees, leaving fruit-stained paper bags behind them to show their gratitude and blow into the moat. And school-feasts had been celebrated in the park, and nuts scrambled for in the grass, and kiss-in-the-ring and casual cricket played, and hymns sighed out uncertainly at nightfall by sleepy children with mugs tied round their necks, and cheers raised with effort—despite all the frenetic invocation of the superintendent's hand and the contortions of his face as he mouthed "Hip!"—for the Squire, to whom, and the Almighty, this day's celestial happiness was due. But apart

from such pettifogging manifestations of humble life, whose joys showed vain and futile against the uncompromising detachment of the stern windows, Mersham to all intents and purposes evinced no greater sign of vitality than the marble mausoleum. As for its present owner, few could say with any certainty what kind of man he was. To be sure, the church-bells had rung for him when it became known that Mersham Hall was masterless no more; and the school-children were given a whole day's holiday, so that their parents might appreciate the blessings of free education better than they were ordinarily disposed to do, and give thanks to Heaven at nightfall (as not a few of them did) that school would reopen on the morrow and new squires had not to be celebrated every day. And the new Squire, in course of time, had come to take stock of his new home, with a couple of daughters—leaving an invalid wife in the South of France and an only son at school—but the visit, for social considerations, was kept informal, not to say promiscuous. No calls were paid or interchanged. The Squire conferred with estate agents, legal gentlemen, and the representatives of mortgagees at the long table in the big library overlooking the deerless park where the butcher's cattle grazed; and drove over the estate with the steward in the steward's gig, while his daughters rummaged through all the rooms and closets of the big house in chamois-leather gloves, being kept so busy in this direction as to remain invisible to the expectant outer world that only snatched its fleeting sight of them in the hired landau as they came and went. Short of a fortnight they took their leave for the South of France, where (it was said) they lived for the dual purpose of health and economy, accompanied by four great hampers of portable possessions culled from their Mersham home; and the daws—temporarily dislodged for their reception—began to build again unchallenged in the roof, and the starlings choked the Mersham chimneys as before. Finally, during the selfsame summer that Blanche celebrated her seventeenth birthday and obtained her bicycle

from Fondie Bassiemoor on the deferred-payment system, Rumor (having in the meantime vindicated her credit by successfully disposing of the aud hoose at Whivvle) declared that the long defunct Flower Show at Mersham was to be revived, and that the young Squire (who would be present at it) was coming to make his home at the rectory to prepare for college.

V

THE church at Mersham was a very different church from the church at Whivvle, and the rectory a very different residence from the vicarage, and the Mersham living a very different thing from the modest stipend that Blanche's father drew quarterly and passed into his bank by the next post; and the Rector of Mersham was a very different man from the Vicar of Whivvle.

In the first place he was a Rector—a designation on which he laid much pious store, striking his pen intolerantly through the less authoritative title when misapplied to his own person, and correcting parishioners with a promptitude bordering on petulance when they employed the words "Vicar" and "vicarage" in respect to himself and home.

In the second place, he did not owe his clerical promotion to the Almighty alone, but to the great Sir Lancelot, and it was the latter, rather than the former, from whom he derived the main part of his authority in parochial affairs, and whose name—when the adjuvant of a name was necessary—he chiefly invoked. For he had married during Sir Lancelot's lifetime a distant kinswoman of the baronet on the distaff side, and so—almost dispensing with any derogatory patronage from Heaven on which such humble clerics as the Rev. Henry Bellwood are driven to rely—was brought to Mersham by no devious route. It is true he cut no great figure in the baronet's lifetime, for the worthy baronet pertained to that type of landed autocrat, rapidly obsolescent, whom clergymen of a fast-expiring school were

wont to designate "an unbending Churchman;" by which, in Sir Lancelot's case (as in many another), they meant to say he never knelt on the well-stuffed hassocks liberally provided for him, or made the least profession of prayer, but sat bolt upright during the Liturgy, and not infrequently through the hymns, with the manner of one for whose augustness the common observances of worship devised for the vulgar were not intended, and who could not be expected to subscribe to them: standing up, indeed, only when the parishioners sat down, the better to take stock of them and count the heads of the assembled tenantry as if they had been sheep.

But the truth was, Sir Lancelot went little to church at all—church being regarded by him merely as an appanage to his state, like his coaches, horses, mistresses, gardeners, and grooms—though the most elaborate provision was maintained for his exalted comfort, and clerical fiction held him up to all the world as an exemplary and devoted churchgoer; watch being kept at the church door each Sabbath day for tokens of his coming, so that if necessary the ringing of the service bell might be indefinitely prolonged until the baronet (pronounced on foot upon the private pathway from the hall to the House of God by messengers) should reach the place elaborately prepared for him. The Mersham pew, in which during latter years at least he sat in spacious solitude—for his greatness ultimately seemed as if it could brook no worshipper beside him—looked out upon the chancel from the north, raised above the heads of the congregation like a box at the opera, and was as commodious within as a bar-parlor, and infinitely more cosy. There was an oaken table covered with a red cloth, big enough for a rubber at whist, on which a carafe of fresh drinking water, surmounted by a tumbler, stood; being a perpetual feature of the Mersham pew since the day when my lady (being at that time pregnant, as all the scholars knew) fainted during the Litany, and had to wait to be revived until water could be fetched from the vestry in the verger's trembling hand; whereat Sir Lancelot swore

and asked if the church did not deem his thirst of as much consequence as the Rector's, in view of all he gave to it; and, damme, let them see to it in future—which, damme, they did. And there was a great stove in the center of the pew, thrusting its iron chimney-pipe ruthlessly through the church roof, that the baronet poked up noisily on frosty mornings while the parson read the prayers, till it glowed red-hot and snored like a sleeper; or expressed ostentatious disapproval of its warmth by puffing out his cheeks and making blowing noises—as his grooms did when they washed their master's horses—slamming the stove door petulantly with his foot. As for chairs for the baronet to sit on, and hassocks for the baronet to kick out of his way, the Mersham pew abounded with them, all displaying the Mersham arms and studded with brass studs bearing the baronet's crest. The Mersham arms, indeed, and the arms of innumerable other families involved by blood and marriage with the baronet's own, crept into every ornament of the church and made even the Biblical allegories of the east window heraldic, so that it took a theologian or an archæologist to decide which were Mershams and which Apostles; wonderful escutcheons and emblazoned shields adorned the spandrels of the arches, proclaiming the expended splendor of departed Mershams; mural tablets and marble cenotaphs cried out the name of Mersham from the walls; a couple of noseless and disfigured Mershams slept side by side in alabaster, with hypocritical joined hands to their chins in protestation of apocryphal piety, and their upturned feet upon a cushion and recumbent hound. The church was filled with Mershams to such extent that there seemed little space for the Almighty left in it, and only a Mersham or a flunkey could have worshipped there with any concentration or comfort.

Whilst the baronet lived the Rector made a principle of involving him in all the points of worship, however trifling, that he might forge the name of Sir Lancelot into an efficient weapon for his own authority, and confound parishoners into

the belief that he and Sir Lancelot were on far closer terms than, in sooth, they were; to which end, on every conceivable occasion that could justify a conference with the master of Mersham, and many that could not, the Rector was up at the hall, and made more use of the great door and the stockinged legs behind it than did any other three visitors combined. Not a bottle of port ever went to the sick, or a platter of soup to the needy from the great hall, but the Rector took care to associate himself with Sir Lancelot in the benefaction; and though the stockinged legs and powdered flunkies at Mersham expressed their own views in no hesitating terms between themselves as to Sir Lancelot's opinion of parsons—and their own—and resented, across the servants' table, the Rector's unwearying attachment to the great doorbell, they dared not openly resist this second mastership imposed upon them for fear of incurring Sir Lancelot's uncertain displeasure at second-hand, and the choir stalls in Mersham Church were consequently filled on Sundays with superfarted tenor footmen and corpulent bass coachmen and alto gardeners and grooms—looking strangely metamorphosed, in surplices—commixed with all upon Sir Lancelot's estate who were unhappily afflicted with a voice, or accused of one by the Rector.

Into this Mersham grandeur, to which by virtue of his wife he was made party, the Rector threw himself heart and soul; allying himself with all the Mersham traditions and assimilating its achievements as proudly as a public school boy espouses the cause and glories of his House; cultivating a Christian and gentlemanly condescension towards such humble brethren of the cloth as had no more than their own godliness, supplemented by a meagre stipend, to rely on; and mixed socially with them as little as possible. Once in a twelvemonth he lent the purely priestly part of him (reserving the social for more exclusive usage) to the Vicar of Whivle for a harvest thanksgiving or missionary service, and invited the Vicar of Whivle in return to occupy the Mersham pulpit on unimportant occasions, such

as a week-night service in Lent, but their intercourse was parochial only, and the name of Sir Lancelot and all the acres of Mersham divided them rigorously in other respects. If he had to call on any business at the Whivle vicarage—and without the pretext of it he did not call at all—the Rector rode over on horseback, as a rule, and discussed the matter mounted, at the vicarage door; an expedient that saved him the necessity of entering the Vicar's house, and put him at an advantage over his colleague in emphasizing the distance between them and illustrating their respective positions, whilst the Vicar shaded his eyes with a hand and dodged incontinently the movements of the Rector's horse, kept throughout the interview in a high state of restivity by the Rector's riding crop lest it might come on too familiar terms with the Vicar of Whivle and betray too great a tolerance of its surroundings. On this horse, which derived from a famous sire of Sir Lancelot's own stable, and boasted a pedigree more precise and lengthy than the Rector's own, he went once a week to hounds in the hunting season, and dearly loved to speak of himself and hear himself spoken of by others as "the hunting parson"—though all the actual hunting he did might have been done as well at home.

Of the orthodox clerical habiliment he retained only the white tie symbolical of spiritual purity, but the Roman collar he discarded in favor of one as like Sir Lancelot's as one hand is like another. In place of the thumbed and dispirited soft felt hat that crowned with lowliness the Vicar's head and accommodated its shape to every wind that blew, he wore a hard and uncompromising felt hat—black in winter and gray in summer, though during the warm weather he was not infrequently to be seen wearing straw or a soft deer-stalker cap with twin peaks. As for broadcloth or clerical blacks, he banished them from his wardrobe, and—except on Sundays and at funerals—approached no nearer to orthodoxy in this respect during the week than by suits of dark gray serge, though his

preference was for tweeds, and he bestrode his parish and Sir Lancelot's acres in checkered knickerbockers like any squire. Theologically speaking, his creed was simple. He believed God to be a Conservative, and, quoting in his own favor the couplet

A good old Tory
Is England's glory

could not for the life of him see how an honest man in his right senses could incline to any other shade of politics, asking: Who were the men who had made England? Who were the men who endowed churches and did not flinch from accepting the highest honors and responsibilities in the land? Were they the poor? Were they the rabid Nonconformists and professional agitators? No. They were the men with a stake in the country, men of boundless liberality and unswerving high principle like Sir Lancelot, who held the Constitution together, and but for whom the laboring class would starve. And so long as his own position was respected, and none of its dignities infringed, he deprecated discontent in all ranks of society below his own. In a country that distinguished only two things, gentlemen and cattle—and held the latter to be infinitely more worthy of the former's notice than any intermediate species of his own kind—the Rector had renounced books in favor of beasts, and dedicated himself to agriculture as the only pursuit befitting the status of a gentleman. He held all the glebe in his own hand and fattened stock like any farmer, accounting a fat steer or shire stallion of more importance than the sickest parishioner. Every morning before breakfast, with a regularity as unfailing as that with which it is assumed he said his prayers, the Rector visited his stock with crusts of oil-cake in his pocket, and converted live flesh into butcher's meat with more energy than souls unto righteousness. Indeed, quadrupeds appeared to be his true parishioners, and the ones nearest his heart. Not a fresh-bought beast of the least family or genealogical preten-

sion within the borders of the Mersham county but he called upon it without delay, and for every five minutes spent by the stuffy bedside of the sick he passed whole afternoons in the pungent atmosphere of the fold-yard. When a parishioner died he accepted God's hand with Christian philosophy, saying "Poor fellow;" when tidings reached him of the untimely demise of some bullock ripe for market, or some promising quadruped struck down in its prime by lightning, his countenance was seamed with consternation as though such an outrageous decree of Heaven were incredible, and nothing served but he must mount his horse forthwith and ride away to elicit more precise details of the calamity.

During Sir Lancelot's lifetime his position had not been devoid of diplomatic difficulty, for Sir Lancelot would have thought no more of telling a parson to go to one place than a parson thinks of telling his parishioners to aim for another, and in his dealings with this august patron the Mersham Rector had to display as much deference and tact as the raggedest tramp that aspired to the baronet's coppers. But with Sir Lancelot's death and the premature demise of his dispirited heir the Rector's social stature grew and seemed to thrive, fungoid fashion, upon the decaying tissue of the estate, and his voice, enriched with undisputed patronage and authority never questioned, matured in body like a vintage port. Where the Vicar of Whivle mistered his parishioners almost as punctiliously as Fondie did, the Rector of Mersham—following Sir Lancelot's lead—hailed farmers of a thousand Mersham acres by their Christian names; not, it must be admitted, in any arbitrary or dogmatic way, but with such geniality of opulent condescension as to cause his patronage to seem (in the sight of those to whom it was directed) like overflowing fellowship, and so to extend its encroachments into the territory of goodwill. To those admittedly below him the Rector behaved with an affability that appeared contemptuous of all the artificial barriers of class, though as the social space between himself and those to whom he spoke nar-

rowed, his affability contracted in proportion, so that to almost equals and brother clerics like the Rev. Henry Bellwood, at whose Christian names his liberties terminated, his manner was less of expansion than of abstracted reserve, and his geniality grew vague and indeterminate, like the summit of a mist-enveloped hill.

When the new Squire came to view his inheritance at Mersham, the Rector was the first to shake him and his daughters by the hand, and as a connection of the late Sir Lancelot, steeped in the Mersham legend and tradition, and a man of weight and prominence upon the estate, the new Squire welcomed him as a valuable ally, confirming all those authorities and prerogatives which, in the interest of the estate, the Rector had assumed; inviting the Rector to continue to watch over its well-being, and to communicate with him at once on any matter threatening or affecting it. This the Rector did, and though the name of Mr. D'Alroy was, in quotation, no substitute (strictly speaking) for Sir Lancelot, the Rector's rich voice extracted from it all the virtue and nutriment vocally obtainable, and converted the new Squire—as he had done the old—into an efficient implement of his own authority. Scarce a week went by but saw letters pass between the two, and Rumor—even if she erred—had ground enough to go on in saying that the young Squire would make the Mersham Rectory his chief home during the years he was to spend at college.

But she had not erred, for the Rector's voice confirmed her, assuming a tone of indulgent uncleship towards the coming guest, without suggesting the least hint of any pecuniary basis to the arrangement—although the Rector's three maids and two menservants and most of the parishioners suspected one. And the fact that the Rector selected in person various pieces of furniture at the great hall and supervised their removal to the Rectory, as appurtenances to the decoration on Mersham principles of a bedroom and study on the bathroom floor destined for the young heir's use, served to show that Mersham history—

so long in a state of suspended animation, and unspectacular—was about to be set in motion once again.

VI

THE month of August was distinguished by three important days. In the pictorial almanac that the Hunmouth Oil Mills sent to Dod's father with their compliments each New Year they figured as follows:

AUG. 5. Death of General Murgatroyd, 1873.

AUG. 11. OILO CAKE FOR CATTLE.

AUG. 14. The Duke of Sax-Holstein-Schleiergeier married, 1821.

But these facts by no means constituted the true significance of the days; and indeed, in the same almanac for the year before, General Murgatroyd's death was flatly contradicted by the Wallworth Colliery Disaster, the Duke of Sax-Holstein-Schleiergeier's marriage was never so much as mentioned, OILO CAKE FOR CATTLE was commemorated on the 8th, and all the rest of the calendar appeared to be similarly revoked and unreliable.

So far as Whivvle was concerned, August 5 might have changed places with any other date in the year, if it had not been Blanche's birthday. On this day she celebrated her seventeenth—or if she did not celebrate, at least she attained it; for in truth the long-anticipated day gained little by a close acquaintance, and fulfilled few of the things expected of such an eventful and vaunted anniversary. Blanche put her hair up in the morning to gratify the full importance of her age, but she let it down again in the afternoon because it caused seventeen to look much older than she liked to see, and imparted an air of propriety too suggestive of parochialism and reform and too reminiscent of the Vicar of Merensea's superior daughters, with

whom (first shutting up all her teeth in a hurry, and guarding them from observation with a mouth unmistakably belligerent) Blanche interchanged bows of mutual animosity as seldom as possible; having had the Vicar of Merensea's daughters too frequently set before her at home, as an example for her own behavior to copy, to be in much love with the originals. Also, she let her hair down again because her father had been tactless enough to approve of it up, saying it was a hopeful and sensible sign, and he trusted, from this momentous day forth, she would dedicate her best endeavors toward serious things. Blanche had published the ultimatum of a birthday party, too, to commemorate the attainment of these most important and romantic "teens," but as the day drew near, and she cast about more urgently in her mind for choice of guests, she realized, with increasing bitterness, how very few inevitable friends she had. There seemed only Fondie and the carrier's daughter—and even the carrier's daughter was now semi-officially engaged to the miller's son from Thripton, and was only available by daylight—and the Vicar's reproach that Blanche had willfully thrown away all her opportunities and forfeited all the good friends she might have had came back upon his daughter on her seventeenth birthday with a new and mortifying significance. She went out on her bicycle in the afternoon to stimulate the sense of new-found emancipation by reckless riding, but the essence of this stimulant proved very volatile. She met nobody on the way, and there seemed nowhere to go to, and her own loneliness depressed her dismally, and the elusive happiness her soul was in search of appeared not to reside within cycle reach of Whivvle. As a relief to her feelings she called on Fondie with one of the two half-crowns that had constituted her father's not unprompted recognition of the day, and said, "Here you are, Fondie. Take this." And Fondie had taken it implicitly, as he would have taken a horse-pill at Blanche's instigation. And she asked him what day it was, and Fondie—calculating on his finger-ends from last Sunday's psalms—opined it must be

fifth, miss. And Blanche said: Of course she knew that, silly! But what else was it? Didn't he know? It was her birthday. She was seventeen.

"I wish you many happy returns o' day, miss," Fondie said in a low voice, that would have been fervent had he only possessed courage. He did not express the wish all at once, for a curious thrill had seemed to pass through him at Blanche's announcement; nor did he add, as his heart within him yearned to do: "There's nobody in Whivvle wishes it you more earnestly than me, miss," for he was unsure of his lips, and fingered the half-crown instead (that on principle, as with all the other coins Blanche brought him, he never put out of sight until their donor was gone, to show how little he set store on them, and how redeemable they were if Miss Blanche only desired). He fingered the half-crown so irresolutely that Blanche exclaimed: "For goodness' sake put it away, or I shall be asking for it back again. Father gave me two this morning. He wouldn't if I hadn't pestered him, and then he grumbled. That's the only present I got. Except some cards. I don't want cards. Who does? They're sickening."

Something (blood, it seemed, by the warmth and fluidity of it) rushed to Fondie's lips and became a cough, and having returned to the heart that sent it, came back a second time and became on this occasion words enveloped in a burning blush.

"I'd like ti make you a present and all, Miss Blanche," he said, "nobbut I dared ti offer, or thought you'd accept it."

"Oh, shut up!" Blanche's splendidly practical voice replied to this piece of supererogatory sentimentalism. "Of course I'd take it if it was worth taking. What sort of a present?"

Fondie, still enveloped in the blood of his own audacity, and buzzing about the ears, had never thought of the gift that all his affections cried out for an occasion to bestow, but, urged on by his blood and courage, he answered—almost at random:

"Bicycle, miss."

By the way Blanche's blue eyes regarded him his own eyes

perceived that the proffered gift was, by her, more doubted than declined.

She said, "Go on! You don't mean it!" when Fondie's humble voice assured her that he did, and that he wished, only, gift was worthier of her. "What? Do you mean . . . from now? From the half-crown? Or from the beginning?"

"From the beginning, miss," Fondie told her. "If you'd be indulgent enough to accept as much . . . from me."

"You wouldn't tell father?"

"I wouldn't tell anybody, Miss Blanche," Fondie pledged himself, almost precipitately.

"Father'd be awfully angry if he knew. He said I ought never to have got it. He only gave me the five shillings today because I made out they were for you. How much have I paid?"

"If you don't mind waiting a minute . . . I'll tell you, miss." Fondie went to the little wooden box, that reliquary of Blanche's precious coinage, and, pouring its inconsiderable particles into the hollow of his hand, transferred them thence on to the bench for better calculation, Blanche curiously watching. "Do you mean to say you've kept them there all this time?" Fondie answered, "Yes, miss." Blanche declared, "You are a great silly! I wish I'd known. What was the use of me bothering to pay you if you didn't want paying!" Fondie commented, "Why, not a deal of use, miss. I'd as lieve you hadn't. I'd a deal liever." The value of her payments, Fondie found, totaled exactly fourteen shillings exclusive of the half-crown. Sixteen shillings and sixpence all told. It was a large sum to have paid out of her slender purse, and even so it left a large sum still to pay. Her father had been right. Bicycles were costly things to buy. She said: "I oughtn't to. Father wouldn't like me. I won't take it. It wouldn't be right. Look here . . . if you like you shall let me have the half-crown back." Fondie, bowing to her desire, gave back the coin demanded with the assurance that Miss Blanche was welcome

to all the rest, and that his gift had been sincerely offered. "And look here . . ." Blanche went on, "if you'll promise not to let father know, you shall let me off paying the rest, if you like." To this compact Fondie subscribed, and was putting the attenuated silver pieces back again into the box when Blanche inquired what he meant to do with them. He confessed that he scarcely knew. He had not made up his mind.

"Shall you keep them in that box?"

"Very like I shall, miss."

"How long for?"

"Maybe a longish while, miss."

"Shan't you spend them?"

"Very like I shan't, miss."

"Why ever not?"

Fondie had no answer to this last inquiry save to say for no particular reason that he knew of.

To see so much good money, torn in the first instance from the very heart strings of her purse, overcame Blanche's last qualms of objection. She said "Look here" again. If Fondie really wished to give her the bicycle and didn't really want to take her money for it . . . she would let him. But she wouldn't take the money now. Fondie should keep it for her. And then—if ever she wanted anything particular—she could come and ask him for it. How much did he say there was? Fourteen shillings? She thought he had said sixteen. "Sixteen and sixpence, with half-crown, miss," Fondie explained. "I gave you that back, if you remember." Oh, yes, Blanche remembered. And now that the bargain was completed, and that Fondie thanked her for it as humbly as he had done when she gave him her order for the bicycle, Blanche remembered, too, to thank him for this handsome birthday gift, saying he was a brick, and she would always think of him when she went out riding now. Only he mustn't tell father, or let anybody else know. And would he just look to the brake for her so long as she was there?

If Fondie had but done what his uneasy conscience told him was due to the young gentleman; what the young gentleman had a right to expect of him—for there was nobody in the workshop at this moment but the two of them! The workshop was delectably warm beneath the beams of the August sun, and filled with the aromatic odor of pine shavings and gums that the young gentleman so loved; and bluebottles that both Fondie and the young gentleman liked to listen to were buzzing about the bull's-eye window-panes and making somnolent music like drowsy contrabassists; and Blanche had on her blue print frock of almost the color of the sky and her own blue eyes. . . . If Fondie had but seized the opportunity presented, then he might have celebrated Blanche's birthday in a manner worthy of himself, and of the young gentleman's faith in him, and of the occasion.

And, but for the bicycle, he might have done. But who, of any self-respect or proper feeling, would lay himself open to the accusation of having attempted to procure one of Blanche's kisses at the cost of a second-hand bicycle?

So Fondie never did, and when the young gentleman—subsequently learning of Blanche's visit and the true significance of the day—inquired, almost eagerly, "Did you . . .?" Fondie could only answer as sadly as before, Why no . . . he didn't, sir.

And that night, despite the gloriousness of the weather and the generosity of Fondie's gift, a sense of dismal disillusionment caused Blanche to shed tears upon her pillow (not more than six, all told) at the futility of her seventeen years that brought her nothing beyond what all her other years had brought; and at the mockery of life that led one on and on with specious promises never to be fulfilled.

To think, on this day of days, she had been reduced to Fondie and the wheelwright's yard for sole commemoration of the anniversary her heart and hopes had decorated with such festal longings and desires. Almost she had the resolution to make

herself sickening, as her father wished, and put her hair severely up, and purchase peace of soul at any price, and serve herself and everybody out. But sleep overtook her before this fateful vow was sealed, and on the morrow she awoke with restored hopes and repaired self-confidence, and her blue eyes scanned the horizon as eagerly for the dancing joy-ships on the blue waters of untroubled life as they had done the day (and many days) before.

VII

ON the second of these three eventful days the young squire came to Mersham. A horse-box swung at the end of his train, and by nightfall the number of horses in the rectory stable had increased to two. To all with any power of prediction it seemed at last as though the Mer-sham fortunes were on the mend. Some among the optimists boldly declared that the festive draught ale and roast beef were not more than a twelvemonth off, and that there would be bonfires and rejoicings at the great hall before another year had passed.

For why—if not for some good purpose such as this—had the young squire come to Mersham? Through all the crippled and disjected members of the once mighty estate a thrill of hope and expectation ran that culminated (on the anniversary of the marriage of the Duke of Sax-Holstein-Schleiergeier) in the Mersham Flower Show.

Since Sir Lancelot's death no Flower Show at Mersham had been held. In the first instance it had been discontinued out of nominal respect to its patron's memory, but deeper reasons than respect had militated against its resumption. For, as the august baronet could tolerate no form of enterprise upon his own estate that aspired to the least independence, and would not prostrate itself upon his bounty, the Mersham Show only

attained his patronage by making itself parasitic to his purse—a thing, truth to tell, it was very ready to do—and this once famous fixture became to all intents and purposes but another of the many affluents of the baronet's style. Sir Lancelot's liberality furnished its marquees, and Sir Lancelot's colors fluttered proudly over each; his purse supplied by far the greater number of its cups and prizes, as well as the military band that blew music in the park; and his gardeners, in one large tent that stood proudly apart from the vulgar atmosphere of competition, staged groupings of floral and vegetable Mersham splendors calculated to strike admiring interjections from every beholder. All day long, while the band played and the flags fluttered and the people moved about the grounds and gardens, the ale-taps in the Mersham cellars splashed unceasing, and though no inebriety was tolerated upon Sir Lancelot's estate—save only and except among his own guests—and any instance of intemperance on the Show day was hid at once by its friends and well-wishers behind the trees, there was as crooked driving homeward on this night as on any night in the year, and drink was not to be had cheaper, even on Election Day, by those who knew the way in which this commodity was to be obtained.

Well do I remember the day of resurrection of the Mersham Show, and all the signs and wonders that attended it. There had been a thunder-shower in the morning. The great black evil-looking cloud lifting slowly from the river, and drawing the blackness of a thousand Hunmouth smokestacks with it, thrust its forbidding silhouette against the sun, like the great dome of a cathedral, and darkened the kitchen of Dod's father's house till all the faces in it were as blurred as blots in a copybook, and the polished fender shone chill as ice.

But by midday our fears and the great black cloud were lifted. The cloud passed over to the sea, trailing a rugged gray Paisley shawl of vapor behind it, fringed with rain, and

the western wall of blue sky rose up again, course by course; and the sun, kindling a myriad lenses of rain, burned August hot.

Dinner that day—for all but Dod's father—was a mockery. Dod's father, still unshaved, in his weekday clothes—or the trousers pertaining to them, for his coat and waistcoat hung over the kitchen door—ate as though the Mersham Show were a whole fortnight off, and discoursed all the while on crops and Mersham Shows of thirty years before, as though thirty years ago were of more consequence than now. Not that anybody listened to him but me—who had to, being a guest, and seated directly opposite to his eye. For us the joint of beef and steamed potatoes and all the plates and dishes to be washed up were but obstructions of desire, like the hateful crowd that blocks the inlet to a circus. We watched the blue sky through the kitchen window with every mouthful we ate, for fear delay might bring another thunder-cloud with it, until the window grew as black to our apprehensive vision as any thunder-cloud could be, and Dod had to run to the open door with his knife and fork in hand and stick the prongs of the fork into the sky, to make sure that the black was black after all, and no rain threatened.

But at last when it seemed that all we could now hope to do was to meet the people coming home; we tore ourselves free of the farmstead and came upon the road in Dod's father's spring-cart: Dod's father driving, with Dod's mother beside him; and Dod and myself behind, with Dod's sister between us, holding on her Anniversary hat. Coming, as the Show did, in the lull before harvest, with the corn still a full fortnight off the reaper (though ripening fast) and little doing on the land, all the world seemed making for Mersham this day. On the road in front of us, and on the road behind us, carts like our own and just as crowded—waving whips and hands and kerchiefs of recognition—jogged along in each other's dust that rose into the air charged with the humid odor of recent rain

and drifted over the hedgerows, where, on the more sheltered branches, raindrops like diamonds hung. Strings of farm-lads on bicycles with cabbage-shaped nosebags tied to the handle-bars overtook us, singing; children, perched three and four together on cottage gates, cheered us as if we had been the king; scores of people trudged industriously upon the road.

But the scene of animation along the road was nothing to that which met us in the park itself, where as many carts—or more—were drawn up as incommode the precincts of the market-place in Hunmouth on market days, whilst tethered horses tossed nosebags and munched tares beneath the trees, or, fly-tormented, shook their harness with a startling sound of swords and soldiery. Great gaunt wagonettes, swathed in eighteen miles of Holderness dust, had rolled all the way from Hunmouth itself, drawn hither by the historic event, and by the proclamation that Mersham Hall—after being so long defended from the scrutiny of the curious—was to be thrown open to the public eye once more on this one day (at the instigation of the Rector) in aid of the Mersham Church fund, at a shilling a head. All over the cattle-cropped and sunburnt sward, bicycles, stacked and prostrate, glittered in the sun, and from every quarter of the park the stream of visitors converged upon the tent, whose rain-soaked canvas, still not altogether dry, majestically swayed and bellied in the breeze.

VIII

WE drew up our cart in line with many more, and tethered the mare beneath an oak tree with a sack of fresh-mown tares at her nose-end.

Blanche was there, in a pale lavender print frock and a large straw hat trimmed with Shasta daisies and blue cornflowers, spinning over her shoulder with a white-cotton-gloved hand a cream sunshade (that she had prodded the pony with upon

the road) and flashing her big smile to all sides of her and behind her father's back. And the Bullocky was there—who had driven them in the vicarage buggy and tethered the pony beneath the trees—in a state of rebellion against his sober Sunday clothes, to which, much against his father's wishes, he had imparted an air of reckless horsemanship and independence by means of a pair of tan leggings. And Deacon Smeddy was there along with the Psalmist in the parson's hat he had worn at twenty successive Whivvle Anniversaries and Heaven knows how many others and Sabbath days beside.

Even Bless Allcot, undeterred by the price of admission, was there with his daughter, and the landlord of the White Cow, and most of the licensed victualers from miles around, with their wives and families and chief customers. And Fondie's aunt was there in black gloves with Fondie's sister, driven over by the saddler from Osterwick, who came to cross his legs in the wheelwright's kitchen one Sunday in every four, which, by those who understand such matters, was said to be a sign of courtship and indicated that within a decade he would ask for the wheelwright's daughter's hand. And the wheelwright himself—infected by the prevalent excitement—had seemed at one moment to be as near to the brink of persuasion as any mortal could stand without falling over, and only his strength of obstinacy saved him at the last instant when the saddler's cart stood creaking at the door, saying: "Gan ti Flower Show? Not me! Flower Shows is nobbut for women and fond folk. I'se ower mich wark ti do." And the saddler's cart drove off unadorned by the wheelwright's decorative beard. Nor was Fondie there, which the wheelwright betrayed more than a disposition to resent, declaring Show was for syke fond chaps as him. What better would he be at yam? And deriving small satisfaction from Fondie's modest admission: "Why, I doubt not a deal, father." But from the first Fondie had never wavered in his intention, as the wheelwright had done, and only that morning he had doubted to Blanche—when she

called to ask if he could accommodate her with a small allowance from the bicycle-box for eventualities at Mersham—that very like he would not be at Show (miss). And when Blanche asked, "Why in the world not?" Fondie had answered (shamefacedly, it is true, for he knew no honest reason could explain why any honest man should fail to go to Mersham on a day like this, when—as Blanche said—"Nobody's stopping you"), "Why . . . I'se jealous for several reasons, miss." But when Blanche asked him what they were he could only blush deeper than already he had done and say one of them was he had promised to meet somebody this afternoon. . . .

"And I know who it is," Blanche challenged him at once. "And I know where you're going, both of you. You're going to church." For she had accosted the young gentleman from the aud hoose but the day before with the same queries—half thinking that the young gentleman, if he could be so persuaded, might come in very handy for parade purposes at the Mersham Show, with a flower in his buttonhole and a stick in his gloved hand—but the young gentleman had proved as unresponsive as Fondie, blushing even a deeper color for no apparent reason, and seeming as shy of Mersham and all mention of it as a dog is of the boot that has just kicked him. The fact that the young Squire was to be present and the hall was to be thrown open to the public only sustained his color without exciting his interest or whetting his curiosity, and, as Blanche herself told him, she couldn't reckon him up. "You've been to Mersham lots of times when it's sickening and there's nothing to do. And now, just when there's something to go for, you stop away. Why?" To which the young gentleman had no better answer than Fondie. She expressed her own intention of being there at all costs. "Father's going. Isn't it awful! But I aren't coming back with him. He needn't think it. I don't know who I shall come back with, yet. I haven't made up my mind. There'll be lots of them there." She confided her eagerness to see the young Squire. She intended to see *him* at all

cost. "He was riding over hurdles in the park this morning. They say he's ever so good-looking."

As soon as Dod's father had paid for our admission through the clicking turnstile where the two policemen stood as though waiting for somebody, Dod said to me, "Come on. Let's leave 'em!"—and when asked why, answered that (otherwise) we should have to take care of "oor lass" while his mother and father went over the Hall, which his mother had set her mind on doing.

The show tent—flapping its indolent canvas wings in the air like a fat Michaelmas goose—was pitched on the green sward in the broad slope of park facing the main front of the great red hall that glowed with the ardor of a brick-kiln in the fierce sun. To one side, under the sleek and sheltering beeches of the avenue, stood a smaller tent for refreshments, furnished by the caterer from Hunmouth, where cups and saucers rattled all the afternoon and three moist-faced women at the back with corrugated forearms washed crockery recklessly and without cessation in as many pails. At the side of the tent, too, a man in shirt-sleeves sliced bread with a guillotine and spread mustard over ham sandwiches by means of a broad knife with amazing dexterity and speed, passing the sandwiches in piles, when finished, to a naked arm that issued snakelike from a hole in the tent. At the other side of the hole in the tent the sandwiches were retailed at twopence apiece, which Dod considered an exorbitant price—asking: Who wanted ham sandwiches smeared wi' mustard fit ti bring tears ti your eyes? One could have ham sandwiches at home, wi'oot mustard!—and bade me buy two sticks of Hunmouth rock instead, which had the advantage that one could suck them for half an hour at a time and put them back again in the breast pocket, like a flute. But though the refreshment tent appeared to do a roaring trade and people were perpetually tripping over the tent pegs as they went in or went out (some of them backwards), so that Dod and I took up a point of vantage for awhile to watch them as

we tongued our flutes, many visitors had come furnished with their own comestibles, and as the afternoon advanced there were few trees in the vicinity of the show that did not lend shelter to picnic parties on the grass, engulfed in the blackness of their shadow. Between the big marquee and the hall, in the full blaze of the sun, the military band from Merensea made the biggest circle possible out of its twenty players and blew martial music all the afternoon, while the crowd alternated between the sunlight and the tropic dimness of the show tent, treading on one another's heels in slow progression round the tables of familiar exhibits; the roses and sweet-peas, the stocks and marigolds, the cucumbers and carrots, and fat and fleshy marrows; spelling out the names of the prize-winners and questioning the verdict of the judges. All the blinds that had darkened the windows these many years were raised on this historic afternoon, and the great house under the Rector's supervision did its best to express occupancy and to look upon the doings in the park with an intelligent and gracious interest, as though its dignity had never known reverse. On the spacious grassy terrace beyond the moat comfortable garden chairs were spread, with rugs and cushions and wicker tables, and here the Rector and his particular party displayed themselves, going in and out of the tall French windows and strolling down to the marble balustrades at the terrace foot, whose white statuary was reflected head downward in the stagnant waters of the moat below. Towards the middle of the afternoon, the assembled company in the park being large enough to justify the condescension, the Rectorial party made a formal procession through the show-ground for the second time—having been round once already, as we subsequently learned, before our arrival. They crossed the moat by the foot-bridge from the terrace, marked "STRICTLY PRIVATE," and it was plain to see which was the young Squire at once, for the Rector had him in custody by the arm, and only took away his hand to lay it on his shoulder when he stopped to Christian-name some

Mersham tenant and exchange words with him in a voice as if the tenant had been the whole park's length away. Dod and I were close to the foot-bridge when they passed over. The Rector was attired in riding-breeches with a gray hat, and smoked a strong cigar; the young Squire—whom everybody stopped to look at, and turned to watch when the party had passed by—was dressed in light flannels, with a straw hat slightly tilted, which he raised from time to time at the Rector's instigation when the tenantry and others paid respect. He was tall and slim and young and smooth-cheeked, and much sunburnt, as if his skin had been warmed by a hotter sun than ours; and it seemed to me, as well as I was at that time capable of judging my own sex in such matters, that he was handsome—though I think I liked Fondie Bassiemoor's face better.

Blanche knew Dod by sight and name, and more than once during the course of the afternoon she brought us to a standstill with her smile, asking Dod if he had seen such a one or such another, or whereabouts her father was—to which latter, when Dod told her, she returned, as though rebuking his intelligence, "I aren't looking for him, silly! I don't want him. You needn't point." Later in the afternoon, towards tea-time, she commissioned Dod to let her father know she would be driving home with Fondie Bassiemoor. Dod said, thoughtlessly enough, "Fondie Bassiemoor isn't here!" as if he were retailing news, and Blanche retorted, "What if he isn't! I don't care. You'll tell father, won't you," and Dod said he would, and Dod did, for I was with him at the time, and the Vicar stroked his beard and looked about the park as though the message had disturbed all his calculations, asking, "Where is my daughter?" Dod might have answered, "Back-side o' yon tent, waiting while I tell her you've gone," but he said he didn't know, instead, and the Vicar, after debating whether to go or stay (for the vicarage pony stood all yoked beneath the trees at the time, with the Bullocky by, and the Vicar was waiting watch in hand for his daughter's appearance when Dod spoke to him), pro-

nounced at length in favor of the former, probably decided by the sight of the refreshment tent and the calculation of three teas; and drove home with the Bullocky—who reappeared later in the evening, having run all the way back from Whivvle—leaving the message that Blanche was to be home by eight o'clock, which Blanche (first asking, "Has he gone?" "Are you sure?" and "What did he say?" when Dod went back to her) declared both sickening and impossible.

It was some time after we had witnessed the Rectorial party pass out in formal procession over the private foot-bridge to the park that Blanche detached her gala smile from the company of an unknown cavalier with a marigold in his buttonhole in the vicinity of the bandstand and came up to Dod to ask if he had seen him. Dod answered, "Aye! He was talkin' ti aud Smeddy a while back, i' tent," and Blanche exclaimed disgustedly, "Oh, shut up! I don't mean *him*!" and explained that her inquiry had reference to the young Squire. She had barely asked the question, and Dod was still engaged in answering, when all at once we saw the Rectorial party return, strolling through the fringe of spectators round the bandstand. I was the first to see them, and I wish now I had announced the fact to Blanche myself. But a sense of diffidence—for which I found it difficult to account—caused me to nudge Dod's elbow instead, and it was Dod who, without acknowledging any indebtedness to my vigilance, but appropriating the discovery as his own, stuck out his forefinger and exclaimed, "Yon's them, see ye!"

Blanche said, "It *isn't*!"—but the negative was by way of acknowledgment only, and involved no denial of the fact, for she altered her position so as to command a good view of the party when they came nearer, and we all grew very still. The young Squire, who had not so much as noticed us when we went by on the first occasion, looked now with marked attention—as if he almost remembered our faces—and it may be he had observed us better, after all, than we thought. Blanche, tap-

ping her tan shoes with the ferrule of her sunshade, stood with her profile to the approaching party until they were so close that we could hear the Rector's conversation even above the band, when she turned and flashed her smile broadside into the company. The Rector—I do not know why, for he was looking in our direction till Blanche turned—chose that precise moment to address a remark to his wife, who walked behind him (retaining one hand upon the young Squire's shoulders as though to prevent any attempt on his part at escape in the meanwhile). The young Squire, without turning, kept his eye on us—though the Rector's hand seemed rather to invite his attention elsewhere—and the three of us kept our eyes on him. I was ready to raise my hat if Dod did—for other people had raised theirs—and of course it was his park, and a very large one; almost incredibly large to be owned by one so young. But Dod didn't, and I didn't. All I did was to drop my eyes and raise them politely again. Blanche, who had faced the party with her full smile and the most unblinking blue eyes—that seemed to say, as plainly as her own lips, they didn't care, and weren't frightened—suddenly bit her underlip and turned upon Dod, telling him (to my surprise) to shut up. “You *are* a silly fool, Dod!” though Dod, whose mouth was open like the lid of a condensed-milk tin, had never said a word. As soon as the party had passed by Dod said, “Come on!” but Blanche responded, “Wait a bit. Let's watch where they go to!” and Dod told her, “They'll gan over yon bridge again”—which they did. The young Squire stood aside most politely for the Rector's wife and all the others to pass, and even prevailed on the Rector to take precedence of him across the moat (though we saw, by the movement of the Rector's arm, this special act of courtesy did not pass undisputed), turning round, as soon as the Rector passed in front of him to take a last look of the band playing in the broad avenue. Dod asked, “Who's he waving ti?”—and my own impression had been that the young squire certainly made a sign with his hand to somebody, but I

was distracted by something fluttering in my eye at the moment, that turned out to be Blanche's scented handkerchief. I can recall the scent of it to this day. Blanche exclaimed: "Go on! He isn't waving to anybody! You are a silly, Dod. Let's watch if he does it again!" And we watched the party cross the terrace to where tea had been laid out for them upon the tables, but he did not look round again, for the Rector (defrauded of his company across the bridge) had him by the sleeve once more, and Blanche put back her scented handkerchief into her belt, inviting us to "Set us as far as tent. There's somebody waiting of me over there I don't want to speak to."

It was the cavalier with the marigold in his buttonhole, who had been standing all this time where Blanche had left him, in the melancholy posture of a blasted oak, professing to take an interest in the band.

IX

WHILE the band played, making the hot air quiver with brassy music and the palpitations of the big drum, the crowd—radiating from the stifled show tent—overspread the park and sought interest in all directions. Some—chiefly the wagonette parties from Hunmouth—choosing the deepest shadow of the trees, regaled themselves on hampers of bottled beer, or played cards on all fours or pitch and toss on their haunches. Sweethearts dallied beneath the favoring twilight of the Mersham trees and strolled with linked arms, languid or laughterful, about the more umbrageous alleys of the park. Others, again, paid pilgrimages to the Mersham Church and stared through the railings at Sir Lancelot's mausoleum, all in spotless white marble, like a lavatory.

The church being open, and the sexton's wife piously engaged in knitting the gray feet of the sexton's stockings within the

porch—a work she was prepared to discontinue at any moment for the acknowledgment of an honorarium—the public penetrated into the sacred edifice, where they moved slowly from one Mersham memorial to another, wrapped in the subdued murmur of their own voices that clung to them persistently like the flies about the flinching cattle in the sunlit park; staring admiration and wonderment at the Mersham pew with its carved oak proscenium and heraldic canopy, its chairs, table, stove, hassocks, and brass-headed nails; or viewing their own faces grotesquely reflected in the burnished orb of the brass lectern (Sir Lancelot's gift to the church) on which the vicious and raptorial eagle perched, supporting the gilt-edged Bible on its belligerent wings. All the afternoon, too, between the hours of three and five, the public passed at a respectful funeral pace through such internal portions of the great Hall as (under the Rector's direction) had been prepared for them; being admitted by the north door and ejected from one still smaller in the servants' wing, a score at a time.

Two hundred and thirty-seven paying guests (including Dod's father and mother) passed through the hall during the course of the afternoon.

At five o'clock the lock in the door of the servants' wing passed its scornful comment upon the departing visitors for the last time, and almost simultaneously the great Mersham bell tolled from its turret in announcement of the fact.

Attendance in the show tent waned. The wilting roses and the flaccid-checked and sickening begonias lost their hold upon attention. Gaps grew in the staging where prize exhibits and uncommended vegetables had been. Sweet-peas and carnations, their function over for good and ill, found their way to favored bosoms and buttonholes as relics of the day. Farmers with cows to think of, and those whose interest in the Mersham Show stopped short of a sixpenny tea in the refreshment tent, took the tolling of the bell as a summons homeward. One by one the horses were untethered from their place beneath the

trees, and rumble succeeding rumble told of another cart upon the road, while across the cattle-cropped and sunburnt sward there drifted wafts of fine dust mingled with dew. Dod's father and mother, squeezing Dod's sister between them till she looked nothing but a hat with two hands clinging to the brim, drove home through the earliest drifts of dust before these had coalesced into the later haze. There was some altercation beside the spring-cart as to our going home with them; Dod contending that his mother had promised we might stay to see the sports, and Dod's mother declaring she had said no such thing, and Dod's sister meanly beseeching both parents in turn (with tears of vexatious supplication in her voice), "Mek 'em come along wi' us an' all!" but when Dod made it clear we only wished to see the tug of war and were driving home at its conclusion with Fondie Bassiemoor when he came to fetch the Vicar's daughter (who had to be home by eight) his mother's objections waned, and his father said, "Why, let 'em stop a bit, missus!" and gave us each a penny for our 'lowance, and the spring-cart rocked off without us. A sense of enormous liberty supervened. The very sky seemed to withdraw with their departure and make way for freedom. The sound of the big drum, beating out from another quarter of the park, quickened all footsteps—including Dod's and mine—to the sports inclosure, where already more people were gathered about the roped stakes than we were glad to see, Dod declaring that he had told me so, and we ought to have picked our places and held them against all comers half an hour ago. Nevertheless, by polite exercise of our elbows and some strategy, we secured stations for ourselves against a rope that delimited the special inclosure reserved for the Rectorial party, where a square of red felt had been laid on boarding and chairs placed and all the prizes arranged upon a table, over which the Mer-sham policeman kept guard in his Sunday gloves. Somebody protruding a face over the rope immediately at the other side of the inclosure and cooing "Oo-lo-oo" in a friendly undertone,

Dod said, "Yon's Blanche, see ye!" and we let go of the rope on our side of the inclosure to wave our hands, which Blanche reciprocated with a smile I have never forgotten. It has often come into my mind since. I wished then that Providence had led us to the other side of the inclosure. I can't explain why, but I did. However, it was now too late to change without grave risk, for the pressure behind us had increased since first we squeezed through it, and at times we were bent double beneath the weight of spectators, with nothing but the yielding rope to hold on to. Every now and then a steward with a red rosette in his buttonhole spread his hands on our faces with his fingers in our eyes, and pushed us back as if we had been so many perambulators, saying "Hod up, can't ye!" as though the fault were ours. He took care never to push the beards and whiskers at the back of us, though all the pressure came from them. What was really needed was a steward to pull the crowd from behind, where the real seat of the mischief was.

When the sports had been in progress for some time the Rectorial party arrived, wrapped in the drifting odor of the Rectorial cigar, and took possession of the red felt and the chairs provided, while the constable stood with his white glove at salute, and somebody cheered. In view of the marked attention that the young Squire had bestowed upon us in the afternoon, I rather hoped he might glance our way again with a renewed look of recognition, so that the bystanders might see, but he passed at once to the opposite side of the inclosure (where Blanche stood) and was obscured from sight, so far as we were concerned, by the other members of the party and the Rector's wife's hat. It was the Rector, however, who lent importance to the inclosure. He took charge of the proceedings and led them as if he had been conducting an orchestra, beckoning here and beckoning there and putting alternate hands to alternate sides of his mouth to send his voice this way and that, and setting all the stewards on the field in motion, so that they

ran at his dictation as hard as any of the contestants and were as breathless and red-faced in the end. At the conclusion of every race the judge had to come up to the inclosure to make his report, the Rector shouting to him as he advanced at a respectful run, "Well, what do you make it, Henry?" and when Henry made it contrary to the Rector's own adjudication the Rector declared in a genial voice, loud enough for everybody around to hear, "I'm inclined to dispute your ruling, Henry!" and did. The final of the hundred-yard race was proclaimed a dead heat by the Rector's direction, and I heard voices express dissatisfaction at this, saying the Rector had better run race with hisself, and what was the use of a judge at all if he couldn't be allowed to judge? One voice complained: "Anybody would think Rector would try and keep prizes i' parish, like. But he'd sooner gie 'em ti onnybody nor a Mersham man. That's two he's gien ti Hoommuth. What's Hoommuth fellows want wi' Mersham? Let 'em gan ti Hoommuth for their prizes."

By the time the last of the tugs of war had been strenuously fought out upon the turf, with a straining of belts and sinews and a contortion of visages—reversed in the paroxysm of contest—the sun had already sunk behind the Mersham trees into a ghostly bath of gray vapor that extinguished its last glow as if the sun had been a seething-hot horseshoe dipped at the tongs' end into the smith's tank. One almost heard the hiss of the burning orb as it plunged into the incompatible element and chilled quickly to an indistinguishable gray. A heavy dew succeeded the heat of the afternoon, gathering wet upon the eyelashes and making the electroplated prizes dim as though one had breathed on them. Wisps of vapor attached to the stars like hay to the hedges at leading-time, and out of the mist-mantled Mersham trees white vapory shapes emerged slowly in single file to float about the park and hover over the hollow places. Some of these shapes, keen-edged and scythe-like, cut the tree trunks in two and, crossing the racetrack,

severed spectators' legs from their faces and decapitated contestants as they ran. Dod said, "Gum! My feet's cowl!" and I had stamped mine a time or two before he spoke.

The playing of the National Anthem—that plaintive music forever associated with disillusionment and the termination of good things—took the weight off our shoulders as by magic. The Rector's wife (Sir Lancelot's distant kinswoman), already mantled, with a fur tippet round her neck, gave away the prizes that her husband handed to her, hemmed in by a small graveside group of hushed stewards and mute officials, wearing their importance as if it had been mourning, and obviously troubled to know which of their many shifting attitudes was the most appropriate to the occasion; but nobody paid this sad last function much notice, save prize-winners and their immediate friends.

Dod plucked my sleeve contemptuously and said "Let's gan!"—which everybody else at that time appeared to be doing. The collapsible wooden music-desks round which the bandsmen had stood were already packed on a hand-cart, and the bandsmen themselves, carrying their dew-dulled instruments or the glistening japanned cases that held them, moved in the current of mere spectators, smoking pipes and accompanying their womenfolk toward the main drive, where a wagonette awaited them—a mournful indication that the great show was indeed over and that little else could now be expected of it.

So, the evening being now well advanced, and the hour such (judging by the firmament and atmospheric conditions and the hooting of the Mersham owls) that we did not care to inquire too closely respecting it, Dod and I reluctantly decided there was nothing left for us but to drive home with Blanche Bellwood and Fondie Bassiemoor—which forthwith we proceeded to do at a double.

Driving thus across the park with Fondie Bassiemoor and the Vicar's daughter, Dod—whose eyes had a range and penetration altogether beyond the power of my restricted town-bred

vision to follow; desecrating countenances where I saw but darkness, despite the assistance of his forefinger that traced them out for me in the void like pictures on his slate—demanded suddenly, "Who's yon?" To the best of my discernment it was but a thorn-bush or clump of gorse, and I said so, but Dod expressed scorn of the suggestion and, heading me sideward as we ran, cried out "Good neet!" with more than his customary affability. Before the greeting left him, to be sure, I saw that the thorn-bush was much less compact than it had seemed at first sight to be, and that to some extent, also, it was in motion like ourselves. But even then I could distinguish nothing, and it was only when a discreet, but quite amicable, "Oo-li-oo!" reciprocated Dod's salutation that I was able to identify part of the thorn-bush as Blanche.

"An' diz thoo see who yon is talking wi' her?" Dod asked me in a subdued voice of some tension. I said "No."

"It's young Squire an' all!"

He stopped to pull up his stocking and tie (so he averred) his shoelace, that might have come unfastened for anything I know to the contrary. I argued that it could not be the young Squire, for Blanche did not know him, but Dod said, "She knaws him noo, right enough. She's been efter him all afternoon."

This was news to me and I rather disputed the authenticity of it, for I had the impression that Blanche had shown us quite a marked degree of notice during the afternoon, and Dod's statement struck at the tender roots of pride. Dod, however, was not to be shaken in his opinion, adducing (as we resumed our course) a number of instances to support his theory, and declaring (as like as not) Blanche had dropped her handkerchief over the inclosure for the young squire to pick up. But we had not gone far before we were brought to a standstill by a second more insistent "Oo-li-oo!" succeeded after awhile by Blanche's own voice exhorting us to wait of her, and in less than half a minute we were all abreast, resuming the drive homeward with Fondie Bassiemoor and the Vicar's daughter.

To Dod, almost immediately on joining us, she presented her bosom, saying, "Look!" and Dod said, "A carnation!" and Blanche rejoined, "You don't know who gave me that!" and Dod said "I do," and Blanche said "You don't!" and Dod said "I bet you a penny I do," and Blanche asked "Who?" and he said "Young Squire," and Blanche exclaimed "Go on!" and, after a moment, "How do you know?" Dod answered that that was the carnation the young Squire carried in his buttonhole. How Dod could perceive the carnation at all was a mystery to me, who could distinguish Blanche's profile only with difficulty and by means of drafts upon imagination and remembrance. Blanche said "Go on!" again. "Lots of folk had carnations besides him. I've had six this evening, and given them all away but this." Dod suggested, "Very like he's gotten your handkercher," and Blanche said, "You are a silly, Dod!" "Show it me, then," Dod challenged her, and Blanche demanded, "Why should I?" "Because you can't!" Dod retorted. For answer Blanche drew out something from her skirt pocket, which she produced with a triumphant "What's that, then?" "It's a spare handkercher you brought wi' ye!" Dod declared. Blanche asked, "How do *you* know?" and Dod said, "Because she's never been unlapped yet. Yon's not same handkercher you waved tiv him when you was stood wi' us!" and Blanche said, "You *are* clever." Blanche seemed in the best of spirits, and after her first skirmishings in regard to the young squire confided to us that he was "champion" and "had plenty off." "He's going to take me over the Hall himself some day," Blanche told us, "when there are no people there. Just the two of us." Even in the starlit mist I could discern the gleaming whiteness of Blanche's smile across Dod's cheek. I was sorry Providence had not contrived to bring her betwixt us, and I was hoping Providence might contrive to improve upon this lopsided disposition later, but Providence made other and less satisfactory arrangements. Just as a redistribution of our unequal forces on the Whivvle road seemed

practicable, and even imminent, a lampless bicycle overtook us at racing pace, urged on by a headless rider, and Blanche said "Pip!" which, though uttered in the lightest voice, took the hump off the rider's back and brought a head upon his shoulders in no time. He drew up so abruptly that the front wheel of his bicycle reared like a prancing steed, and before I understood that Blanche had taken leave of us she was already fading away in the dusk with her arms about the rider's neck, letting fall the consolation of a valedictory "Oo-li-oo" behind her.

So Dod and I drove the rest of the journey home in silence with Fondie Bassiemoor, who on this occasion had nothing to say for himself; and Dod's mother asked us, when the dog announced our advent and Dod blinked in the kitchen lamp-light with me behind him, if this was eight o'clock—which (if my memory serves me) it scarcely was.

X

THE Mersham Show, passing into the service of local chronology like a sire into the breeding-stud for the procreation of a whole progeny of legends, headed a new chapter in the life of Whivvle, and the life of Whivvle seemed thereafter never quite the same. The old gentleman and his grandson, for instance, were never afterwards to be met with on the Mersham road, or to be seen seated on the fallen trunk in the Mersham park. And the stream of inquiring bicycles characteristic of the month of August, as though dried up at its source, shortly ceased altogether to trickle through the Whivvle High Street; and those strange worshippers with watchful eyes and furtive bearing, once frequentative of Sunday service—whose presence distracted the choir and embarrassed the pointing of the Psalms—came rarely to the Whivvle Church. Even Blanche's religious principles participated in the subtle but not less universal change. She

did not, it is true, espouse the cause of the American organ dear to her father's heart and not yet dead to his desires, albeit seldom mentioned save with a sigh that seemed to argue it defunct, but she conceived a taste for higher and more choral worship, and cycled to Mersham Church for the express purpose of hearing the singing, which (truth to tell) since Sir Lancelot's death was far from what it had been or might be. To be sure, the presence of the young Squire sitting in the Mersham pew beneath the ponderous armorial canopy in black oak where twenty years before Sir Lancelot's self had sat, along with the Rector's wife, the stove, table, and water-bottle, served to revive (under the Rector's fostering care) an interest in ecclesiastical affairs, and caused the voluntary choir to be more regular in its habits, if not in its intonation. Blanche discarded, too, the usage of the word "sickening" as relative to life in general, and adopted instead an air of almost jubilant indulgence and toleration toward Whivvle affairs, saying that Whivvle was "right enough." The flowers drooping at her belt were now notably of a superior quality to those she had displayed before, and excluding all common garden or corn-field blossoms were such as might (one could believe) have done no discredit to the Mersham Rector's greenhouse. Also, she less frequently crunched with her serviceable and complacent white teeth the boiled sweets and mammoth humbugs that Deacon Smeddy purveyed in conjunction with the Psalmist, but displayed no stint of chocolates of undeniable richness and quality, which she offered to acquaintances with as much freedom as she had previously dispensed mere mint-drops, saying, "Here you are!"—supplemented (in the case of such old-established associates as Fondie Bassiemoor) with the challenge, "You don't know who gave me those!" And—in case of such an old-established associate as Fondie Bassiemoor—the answer was invariably that he doubted not, miss; though when exhorted by the Vicar's daughter to guess, his considerate duplicity could never quite extend the length of disclaiming such a task

as beyond him, but modestly suggested (if she would forgive him being wrong) that it might be, mayhap, the young gentleman from Mersham. And Blanche, gratified by the coveted accusation, would declare with all the emphasis of her white teeth:

"Go on, Fondie! How do you know!"

Fondie knew because everybody in Whivvle—save and excepting Blanche's father—knew. When Blanche led her bicycle out of the vicarage gate and looked first this way and then that, as though debating in which direction her ride should lie, no reasonable intelligence in Whivvle doubted for a moment the course the ride would ultimately take; and for every once that she headed home from Merensea she came back half a dozen times by way of the Mersham Road, from the attractive greenery of the Mersham Woods. And in place of the once familiar bicyclists and strayed worshippers, the active eye of Whivvle grew accustomed to the single person of a dark-complexioned young gentleman on horseback in white cord riding-breeches and tan gloves, who ambled through Whivvle at intervals with his hat at the back of his head, as though the world were of no concern, and his gaze leisurely, as though time were of no account; whistling soundlessly to himself through piped lips, or abstractedly smoothing the withers of his horse with the thong of his riding crop or caressing the animal's polished neck with his gloved hand—at sight of whom work stopped instantaneously, as if its cessation had been commanded through a megaphone. Workers, turned on the instant to statuary, preserved the attitude of their petrification until the horseman had passed by, and foreheads rose four inches over wall-copings, and twice that height over hedge-tops, and human faces grew magically out of geranium pots in cottage windows, and graven fingers drew starched curtains cautiously aside, and voices—hushed for all the world as though the young gentleman in white riding-breeches with the tan gloves and sleek velvet eyebrows were the portentous figure of some equerry of Death—whispered: "Yon's him, look ye!"

For Blanche the third personal pronoun—applied so indiscriminately and yet so unmistakably to so many identities—attached itself to the person of this gloved and booted rider with the force of a proper noun, and admitted of but one significance when she heard or uttered it.

Into that romantic and visionary world of which the young gentleman of the aud hoose and Fondie Bassiemoor were conjoint creators and sole inhabitants, the equestrian specter brought dismay. Betraying visible concern in his eyes and agitation in his lips, the young gentleman sought Fondie Bassiemoor in the wheelwright's yard one day to ask him how he did and how his father did, and how his mother and sister did, and when he heard with satisfaction that all these did pretty much as they usually did, dropped his voice two whole tones to convey to Fondie Bassiemoor the ominous intelligence that he had at last seen HIM. The intelligence seemed so troubled and so charged with concern that one might have thought it called for words of condolence and sympathy, though these were lacking on Fondie Bassiemoor's part. Notwithstanding, he saddened his eyes a little and lowered the lids over them, and put resignation into the curves of his mouth for the utterance of "Indeed, sir!" The young gentleman, still preserving the tone of disturbed serenity in his voice, and breathing harder through his nose than was usual with him, specified the time of the specter's apparition. It had been "just now," and at the church gate. And dropping his voice another whole tone, the young gentleman added, after a pause that seemed desirous of preparing his listener for the worst: "That's not all. SHE was with him."

The effect upon Fondie Bassiemoor's exterior parts was disappointing. Perhaps his color rose a shade—but there was little to denote that the communication had any bearing on his own destiny, and all he said by way of acknowledgment to the young gentleman was, "Very like, sir"; which occasioned the young gentleman some surprise.

"Very like?"—and then, parenthetically correcting the ex-

pression for Fondie's benefit, "Very likely" (which Fondie thanked him for and repeated)—"How do you mean? Did you know?"

Why, in a way Fondie had known, and in a way he hadn't, sir. He'd heard folk talk—if one could call that knowing; though it wasn't (in his experience) a very safe sort of knowledge to rely on, sir. The young gentleman, with a shade of reproach in his intonation, remarked, "You never told *me*."

Why (again), so far as that went, Fondie admitted he hadn't. He found extenuation of this confessed offence in the fact that it had been in his mind a time or two, sir. But he had not wished to trouble the young gentleman. "Talking can't alter things, sir," he said. "Sometimes it only makes them worse. If I was to repeat everything I heard I should be no better than them that says them." "What things do they say?" and Fondie answered, after putting the question in mental perspective and viewing it with a troubled visage, "Why, nothing much but what you've seen for yourself, sir."

Yes. They had been together this afternoon, said the young gentleman. Blanche was seated on the stile, and the third person singular stood by her, dismounted from his horse with an elbow on the stile and an arm looped through the slackened reins.

To the young gentleman much more than to Fondie Bassie-moor—who, while expressing modest understanding of what the young gentleman meant, stood respectfully aside from his apprehensions as one devoid of right or title to take more than passive part in them—the issue appeared calamitous. The coming of this representative of the wrongful occupants of Mersham had made things difficult enough at the aud hoose. So long as Mersham, while nominally possessed, had preserved its aspect of non-proprietary neglect, imagination, uncontested, had been at liberty to seize upon this patrimony as its own. But the Mersham Show, setting the public seal upon injustice, and bringing an emissary to perpetuate it, had deprived imagina-

tion of its hold upon the things it clung to and made it outcast and despondent; fiercely resentful, too, in his grandfather's instance. The mere sight of the double-demy show-bills—by kind permission of EDWARD FOLJAMBE D'ALROY, ESQ.—placarded on tree trunks and barn gables served to send the old gentleman back into the walled retirement of the aud hoose, from which, of late, he had betrayed less disinclination to wander, with mortification in his breast. The half-thawed springs of condescension froze again. Even to Fondie Bassiemoor he became remote and monosyllabic once more, and heard (when he heard at all) with much of the old difficulty and impatience, demanding, "Eh? What?" as he had done when Blanche first bearded him amid the tin cans and mildewed boots that littered the shrubbery beyond his glass-topped wall. On the day of the Mersham Show the padlock (rusty with long disuse) went back upon the aud hoose gates, and while the westerly wind blew—along with the black advancing wall of thunder—the melancholy jubilation of the Mersham peal as far as Whivvle, the old gentleman and the young worked together at a table that groaned beneath big books of blazonry and endless literary and documentary encumberment of genealogical research.

Upon the old gentleman the sound of the bells had an effect comparable to the boom of cannon upon the resolute besieged. It was as if they were beleaguered by bells and held the citadel against these brazen assailants of their honor and their peace. To the young gentleman when the first rang out—losing sight of the usurpation of his own glory that they betided, and listening with an interest and modest self-detachment not unworthy of the wheelwright's son—the music fell with a sweetly mournful cadence, wafted over the garden wall with thoughts of Blanche and Fondie, and speculations concerning this afternoon. He could have wished, indeed, even at such a crisis as this, that he had been but Dod or the Bullocky, or some such other, to taste the sweetness of the chiming to its full,

unembittered by any intrusion of self and tincture of corrosive pride; and for some moments associated himself so completely with the joyfulness of the outer world, and lent the bells such a pleasant and favoring ear, that the old gentleman (surprising the look of rapt attention upon his face) demanded—as though with quick suspicion of the verity.

“What is it?”

He answered thoughtlessly: “The bells.”

“The bells! What bells?”

“The Mersham bells.

With the mention of the magic name of Mersham the old gentleman's hearing was opened like the heavens, and he heard them. He heard them with incredulity and anger; anger, that these bells were ringing in a cause so unrighteous; incredulity, that his grandson could have displayed no more pride than to listen to these disinheritors of his glory with a countenance so utterly insensible of the wrong they did him. The Mersham bells were *his* bells. They should have been ringing for *him*. If he had been possessed of any proper pride, the sound of these suborned bells should have stung him to the angry exercise of it, not to complacent smiles. With a patch of crimson smouldering on the withered whiteness of each cheek, he threw out a waxen fist toward the bells and shook it, as if he cursed them. Come! They were both to blame. They were dreaming their days away. Deeds, not words. To work, both of them. Let the bells ring! They should ring again before long. They should ring to a better purpose, a better cause. Truth and justice should prevail.

XI

BUT now a worse thing had befallen.

This new-found friendship of Blanche with the Third Person seemed to threaten the very foundations and assail the security of that blest and visionary world in

which the young gentleman and Fondie Bassiemoor had lived so equably and taken refuge from the realities of the outer world so long. For how could the young gentleman profess friendship with the friend of his enemy? If Blanche learned who he really was, how could Blanche in turn be friends with him—viewing her friendship with this other—or friends with Fondie, knowing Fondie to be his inalienable friend? At all points the issue was vexed with difficulties.

Before (he explained to Fondie) it had only been Mersham: the great Hall and the park, and the things that went along with these. But now it was personal. It was somebody—somebody he had never wished to see or know or meet. To obtain what rightly was his own, somebody must first be deprived of it. Somebody he had never seen until this afternoon; somebody whom he ought in duty bound to hate, and could not; somebody whom (by what he had seen of him) he might almost come to like, yet must not, and had to hope that he might never see again.

Fondie, in the troubled silence that followed, said he saw, sir. "I should feel the same, maybe, if it was me." From considerations of the ethical difficulties in which Blanche's acquaintance with the newcomer plunged all parties concerned, the young gentleman turned his attention to Fondie's particular share in them, and tried with all the delicacy at his command to probe the state of Fondie's feelings. Fondie's feelings were as they always seemed to be, resigned and uncomplaining. That the Vicar's daughter had found still a fresh interest in a fresh quarter, ignoring him, occasioned him neither resentment nor surprise. Do what he would he would never be able to make himself worthy of her. They were—if the young gentleman would kindly allow the expression—as good friends as they ever had been, but nothing more. No, nothing more, sir. Miss Blanche had been sat in the workshop that very morning, and several times of late, and had never conversed with him nicer or more familiar than now she did. But for that reason,

if for no other, it behooved him not to presume on the confidence reposed in him, or suffer her kindness to deceive him into thinking it other than it was. When gentlefolk came to see Miss Blanche on horseback, sir, it was scarce likely she would think a deal about a working man in drill trousers, with machine grease in his finger-nails. And grammar—if the young gentleman would absolve him of ingratitude—only served to show a man his shortcomings without doing much to mend them. Not that he would cease, sir, to strive to make himself a better scholar than he was, and a better man than he had been; but he doubted that for the future he must prosecute his studies for their own sake, and not for any reward that had, strictly speaking, nothing to do with them at all, sir. Virtue, as had been truly said, was its own reward. “And after all, sir, if Miss Blanche can find more happiness in somebody else’s company than in mine—that has nothing much to commend it, I’ll admit—I oughtn’t to begrudge her. I ought to be the first to feel glad of it for her sake. One can’t pretend to care a deal for anybody, sir, unless one puts their happiness before one’s own.”

And if Blanche’s happiness was what Fondie coveted most diligently, without seeking to make himself the sole channel of it—as is the selfish way of the generality of lovers—then great must have been his reward, for Blanche’s happiness was patent to every eye (save the parental) and in the splendid jubilation of her smile was something almost akin to the triumph of trumpets. By the irony of that ironic fate, too, which respects no fitness in human affairs and makes mankind the victim of its most preposterous paradoxes, it was to Fondie rather than any other to whom Blanche seemed to turn when her overflowing and exuberant bosom experienced the need of some confidant—some amicable and sympathetic vessel into which she might discharge her overflowing happiness without repulse of pride or acridity of jealousy. For the carrier’s daughter, now deeply engrossed in the plenishment of that mysterious “bottom

drawer" by day and in those mysterious perambulations that pass under the name of courtship by night, was no longer quite the confidante she had been—betraying too much tendency to magnify the importance of her own affairs, and too much disposition to see in Blanche's buoyant happiness a challenge and belittlement of her own.

Those latent jealousies, in point of fact, that underlie all the affections of the fairer sex and are at the root of their dearest protestations of friendship had been mutually aroused. The happiness of each was an antagonism, quick to suspect the other of superiorities; and though the alienation of their friendship had been in the first place due to the carrier's daughter, by the light of Blanche's new interest her sex found convenient to lose sight of the fact, affirming to her mother that the Vicar's daughter was grown too grand for her, and she saw it now. In which susceptible frame of mind she was prone to find offence with the most innocent words and actions of her former friend. The Vicar's daughter had only called (for instance) at such a time or other because she knew her quondam inseparable would be at the washtub with her head pinched up in curl-papers, or at the ironing board with a pink flannelette face and forehead—in order that Blanche might triumph in the parade of her own leisure and make believe she was a lady.

All of which argument (or most of it), though false as false, was feminine as could be, and did its share in widening the breach between them.

In October the equestrian figure vanished from the view of Whivvle, to be "larned high books" at Oxford, in the words of the vernacular. Blanche, in all her resplendent best, called round at the wheelwright's yard to ask Fondie if he noticed anything funny about her eyes. Fondie, after a spasmodic lowering of his own—which was his equivalent for inspection—answered, "Not particular, he hadn't, miss!" eliciting from Blanche the query, How was he like to notice anything with-

out looking? Thus admonished, he took more courageous stock of them, and repeated his previous assurance, albeit with a private conviction that they were somewhat bluer (if anything) than his modesty had conceived them before. "Do they look as if I had been crying?" Blanche demanded. Judged by the expansive area of smile below them they certainly did not, although there was a brilliance about themselves and a glossiness about their lashes that (now Blanche drew attention to the fact) had a certain affinity to tears, and might lend a certain color to the supposition. Still, Fondie decided, not in his opinion, miss, as being the politest form of answer under the circumstances. Blanche, after a perceptible pause in which she seemed to consider whether this answer was consolatory or the opposite, remarked, "That's all right, then!"—but added, lest Fondie might accept this bravado too much at its surface value, "I have, though. Surely you must have noticed! You couldn't but help!" She had just seen the third person singular go—having cycled over to the level crossing beyond Mersham for the purpose. At least, she had not seen the third person really, for he had warned her he might not be able to look out of the carriage window or wave his hand if the Rector traveled up with him—and she supposed the Rector must have done so. It was always the way. But she had descried part of a head that she felt sure was his in a first-class carriage, and she saw the horse-box at the tail end of the train. She knew he was taking his horse, for he had told her so. He meant to hunt with the Bicester. Everything was sickening again, of a sudden, and Whivvle felt awful. Didn't Fondie feel how awful it felt? Good gracious, Fondie never felt anything!

The third person had promised to write to her, and she had promised to write to him. Perhaps there would be a picture post card from him in the morning. Did Fondie think there would? Fondie thought it very likely, miss. And did Fondie know what she intended doing? She intended crocheting a silk necktie in the third person's college colors for his birth-

day. She knew when his birthday was; it was on December 2. He would be nineteen.

She would come and sit with Fondie and get on with the crocheting of the necktie while Fondie worked. In the hour of divorcement from what had constituted her happiness all these recent weeks she made, and communicated, a great discovery—the same discovery that the young gentleman had made, and communicated, months and months before. There was no one to talk to in Whivvle but Fondie. Everybody else was sickening. She had no friends. Nobody in Whivvle cared for her. Fondie was the only friend she had.

XII

ONE afternoon in mid-November Blanche Bellwood walked out by the familiar gateway of the vicarage garden. She carried no *Sunday Sacred* in her hand, nor paper fruit bag with the crochet-hook protruding that had (in recent days) superseded the more frivolous ensign of her early youth and imparted an air of almost sober industry to her comings and goings before the face of Whivvle. No bangles tinkled at her wrists; the Hunmouth stockings were replaced by unostentatious hose to which not even the most uncompromising parent could have taken exception; and when the gate clashed behind her and she came out of the untidy, weed-grown garden into the grass-fringed pathway beyond, she stood for awhile with her face turned dubiously in the direction of Whivvle as an unaccustomed traveler might have stood with his eyes fixed upon the horizon of a new country, not knowing what hazards or hospitalities it held in store for him.

For this was not the Blanche of old. This was not the Blanche of "Don't cares" and "Aren't frighteneds." This was another Blanche, born of the fierce crucible of the cares and

fears she had once so recklessly defied. For all her flamboyant contempt of him, indeed—to which he had appeared so long indifferent—Time had chosen this month to take a stern revenge at last; a revenge more stern than any benign and hoary-headed figure of Time's antiquity ought ever to have taken upon one of such gentle sex and tender inexperience, and never again would the Vicar's daughter be able to accuse this aged despot that nothing happened. And though she chose the Whivle road and followed it, her own volition took no part in the choice—save indeed to shrink from it—for there was no road she wished to walk on, and no place she wished to go to, now; and no person in the world she wished to see or whose eyes she wished to meet, or whose face brought comfort to her. Something stronger than her will—some wild, resistless instinct stung out of its sleep by the poison of her fear—seemed as if it drove her forth from the unbearable silence of her dreadful home to seek in fellowship she knew not what, whether comfort or courage or the confirmation of this dreadful thing; the dire unveiling of the visage of that shrouded terror that reigned in her bosom, undeclared and featureless; oppressing every thought and tyrannizing over every nerve and darkening every avenue of joy and turning all the loveliness of life into a taunt and mockery, as though the sunlight were a hot whisper insinuating her shame, and the blue sky above her Nature's contemptuous and unmerciful smile. For it was one of those benign Martinmas days in which the aging year seems all at once to recall summer, as an old face, smiling, does its youth. The sun, of a gold as soft as wheat straw, sat burnlessly in a milk-blue sky, diffusing a beneficent dry warmth over the land; and beneath his glory the remnants of the dying foliage that still clung to tree and hedgerow assumed the splendor of rare flowers. Cardinal and russet, bronze and red and citron yellow lent the dying leaves a beauty beyond anything they had ever known in life; and in the tranquil sunfulness that lulled all these leaves it almost seemed as though the cadence of the year

should never find a close, but dream on perpetually like this, in deathless protraction.

Thoughts of Fondie and the comfortable sanctuary of the dim workshop at the end of the wheelwright's yard haunted Blanche's mind as she walked. She would have desired no better, dearer termination to her journey than the big bench moored like a raft in a sea of shavings beneath the tempered rays that fell upon it through the spider-curtained skylight of glass, while the sun stabbed the pantiled roof in a score of places with beams as sharp and keen as corn straws, and fused the shavings on the floor as if it would have fired them; where, whilst Fondie worked, and his bare arms passing to and fro amid the spears of light flashed vividly each time these broke upon the flesh, she might have sat in that serene happiness of blessed discontent that had once been hers, and out of the very security of a heart at healthy peace with all the world proclaimed the world "sickening," and in this familiar allegation known her heart happy. But now, though her footsteps—responding to no dictation of her own, but the restless instinct that impelled them—led her past the wheelwright's signboard in the main street, her heart, when she came abreast of the once frequented yard, sank dolefully within her as though this place of shelter and of comfort were sternly barred. No sign of Fondie at once punished and consoled the look she turned in passing. The yard was still and desolate, draped with the lingering horror that hung over her and made of all Whivvle a place of desolation and disaster. Her lips, it is true, remembered their old-time smile; but that was no more than a habit, born of physical necessity. Voices said "Hello!" or "Good day," and her own voice, like an echo, returned the greeting; but to Blanche, with her lips parted and the corpse of a slain smile between them, these greetings were as terrifying knocks upon the gate of conscience, causing her heart to stumble beneath the burden it bore. And every greeting given and acknowledged, and every face she met, affected the unexpressed

purpose of her footsteps, as if they had been ambuscades and perils on her way. Each grew more terrifying than the last; a face twice seen, or a smile a second time encountered, made her soul grow sick.

And yet, the instinct stronger than her will and more authoritative than her fears drove her before it with a step so like her own in happier times that not the keenest eye could have suspected the Vicar's daughter to be led by anything but her own desires, and brought her to the carrier's gate at last.

All was as it had been when Blanche laid her hand upon the wicket and passed into the garden. The dog, barking her very name in joyous monosyllables, ran out with a rattle of chain from his bone-littered kennel by the kitchen door, strangulating himself into a fit of coughing through the strenuous endeavors of his friendliness to reach her, aggravated by the sound of her voice and her extension of an unattainable hand. The tortoise-shell cat sat licking herself in the sun on the blued flagstone before the kitchen door, by the roots of the jargonelle pear tree that pushed its stem out of the cobbles and spread its branches right and left over the weathered bricks of the kitchen gable. Everything, everywhere, was as it had been, and this immutability of things about her marked all the more terribly the change and alteration in her own bosom. That these external features could be so unmoved, and she (within herself) so altered, filled her with an inexpressible sense of alienation, of divorce from all that had spelled life for her until this hour. If—so did her heart stand still before the threshold of the carrier's kitchen, as though it had been the threshold of Destiny itself—if she could have drawn back now she would have done so, for at this moment her fear was stronger than the instinct that led her, but the figure of the carrier's wife seen obscurely at the bread-board in the darkened kitchen beyond, and the voice of the carrier's wife, apostrophizing Blanche in welcoming and friendly tones as "quite a stranger," forbade all flight.

Blanche entered. The kitchen was hot and horrible—a

purgatory for souls in pain. The last of the Martinmas flies buzzed about the window, and ever and anon raised despairing death-songs from the viscous papers spread out for their destruction from the ceiling. A great fire burned in the grate, for whose better combustion the blind had been suffocatingly drawn against the sun's rivalry. On the fender, shrouded with a napkin, stood a pancheon of swollen dough, already risen above the pancheon's rim. The heat from the glowing fire struck Blanche's cheek with a burning and unbearable force. It was as if this fiery element had fiercely accosted her and brought her to book with the weight of a hot and ruthless hand.

"Set ye down, Blanche," said the carrier's wife. "Shift yon wet dish-clout off o' chair-back, will ye? My hands is all flour."

Blanche displaced the dish-cloth and sat down with a sound through her lips expressive of the intolerable warmth within.

"You're hot in here."

"Aye, it's warm i' kitchen," the carrier's wife admitted. "But one can't bake wi'oot fire. Fire was ti mek up again, a while sin'. Maybe you feel it more, wi' walkin'."

"Where's Ada?"

"Didn't ye know?"

Yes, Blanche knew. Save for the reassuring knowledge, indeed, this kitchen too would have been barred to her fears today, like the wheelwright's workshop. Nevertheless, she shook her head and answered, "No," inquiring by an after-thought, "Where is she?"

"She's i' Hunmouth, stopping wi' Arthur's sister. It caps me nobody's telt ye. She was wondering you hadn't been ti see her latelins. Nobbut you'd come day before yesterday you'd 'a seen her before she left."

Blanche emitted an expressionless and perfunctory "Oh." The sound of the magic name of Hunmouth, that had been once upon a time her symbol for all that betokened liberty and life, stirred her no more. Hunmouth was but a dead and

withered word, awakening no envies, no desires; signifying nothing to her state of despair. She sat with the sunlit door in the corner of an eye, that showed her the tortoise-shell cat making complacent toilet on the hot flagstone beyond, and watched with hypnotic and abstracted attention the work of the carrier's wife at the paste-board—kneading the dough with resolute big fists and floury forearms, and dredging from the big tin dredger by the board-side, that sent drifts of impalpable fine powder to make commotion in the sunlight and cause the doorway beams to dance. A voice—Blanche's own voice, issuing (to her own ear) from some strangely remote and disconnected part of her, as though it had slipped into articulation without the complicity of her lips—asked when Ada would be home again (not that the voice had any interest to know; knowing, in fact, already), and the carrier's wife said, At week-end (she expected), but it was bad to tell. She shook her head in indulgent anathema of the bottom drawer, declaring, "Oh, that bottom drawer! I wish it was far enough!" and communicating that the bottom drawer was filling fast—it was as much as Ada could do, now, to open it or shut it to again, with the press of things inside; and still it wasn't satisfied, but swallowed money as fast as she could make it, and cried for more; and Ada was growing very restless to be gone, and commenced to find a deal of fault with her old home and her old father and mother; and they might look to lose her at any time now. First it had been next August, and then next June, and now it had got to April, and she wouldn't be surprised if they had to part wi' her by New Year. Well, to be sure! She wasn't grumbling, bottom drawer made all girls alike. When once they got that into their heads, home was no more good to them. They never settled and couldn't agree, and wouldn't be satisfied till they was gone. She'd been the same herself. It would be Blanche's turn next.

Once upon a time—and that time not long ago—Blanche would have answered with the full collaboration of her smile,

"Not it!" and with inconsequent and mocking lips laughed the idea to scorn as the carrier's daughter had done, and the carrier's wife before her, and as all other girls did whose disclaimers wrapped up in transparent tissue the secret aspirations of their youth and sex. But Time was, and had been; and Time, such as Time had been, might never be again. Blanche said no word, and the chance familiar saying of the carrier's wife—a saying that had been laughingly leveled at her in this very kitchen, and as laughingly repudiated, occasions without end—stabbed through her bosom now with such a pang as a knife might have caused her, leaving a trembling and sick weakness behind.

"Aye! Ye needn't deny it. Ada did same. So did I when I was Ada's age. We shall be getting ti know summut before si long." And by a significant transition the carrier's wife inquired after the necktie. "How's crocheting going on?"

"All right."

The carrier's wife bestowed a glance upon Blanche's empty and listless hands. "You ain't brought it wi' ye then?"

Blanche's voice—for her voice seemed now an organ detached from herself, uttering words and sentences in which she had no part—said "No."

"En't ye gotten it done, yet?"

Blanche's voice said, "Not yet."

The carrier's wife reminded her of her promise. "Think on you said you'd let me see scarf before it goes. I thought maybe you'd brought it wi' ye this afternoon when I seed ye come ti door."

Blanche's voice murmured "Oh . . ." But for the apathy with which the interjection left her lips it might (for what it cost her) have been a cry of pain. The carrier's wife, fitting a paste lid to a pie-dish lined with segments of apple, and paring off the superfluous edging with deft strokes of a much worn knife, caught the curious intonation and turned with quick inquiry to the seated figure by the door.

"Why . . . what's amiss wi' ye, Blanche?"

Once more her words stabbed through Blanche's bosom, bringing on the trembling and the sick weakness. Her startled fears, roused to denial of themselves by the question, and the unbearable look of scrutiny in the carrier's wife's eyes, strove to say "Nothing" with assurance and conviction, but the voice issued from a remoter part of her than before. Between herself and her anxieties and this organ for their denial a great gulf seemed widening. And the kitchen was hot—horribly, suffocatingly hot.

"Nothing?" The carrier's wife, with the pie-dish poised on the extended finger-tips of her left hand and the worn knife upheld in her floury right fist, dwelt dubiously on the word, persevering in her gaze of scrutiny. The look at any other time would have been of motherly solicitude itself, but now it reflected all the horrors in Blanche's own bosom. It was an appalling, a horrifying, a heart-sickening and ominous gaze, staring forth apprehension and blank dismay; a gaze that Blanche felt the impulse to repel with her two hands as she might have fended off an apparition, with the cry, "Don't look at me like that. What are you looking at me like that for? Don't! Don't!"

"You don't look very grand," the carrier's wife incautiously said, for of all forms of incautiousness the most fatal is to lend confirmation to the misgivings of the sick. "My word, you don't an' all, noo I come ti tek notice. A's sure! You en't gotten a scrap o' color i' your cheek. Have you been over-setting yoursen i' sun? . . . Lawks, lass! You don't mean ti faint! Sure-ly!"

XIII

FOR with this dire corroboration of the fears that had besieged her bosom all this while, Blanche's undermined fortitude fell at last. She tried to give denial to the charge, but that surging gulf of sickness, long threatening, swept tumultuously in between volition and her voice, and left her tongueless. The pie-dish, elevated on the carrier's wife's upspread fingers like some monstrosity containing a terrific Host, and the knife she held in her whitened fists, blade upward, seemed like the very insignia of the ritual of Doom. One moment only these things showed themselves thus in preternatural keenness to the figure by the door. The next, a ghastly gray aureole obliterated the pie-dish and the knife and all objects more dimly seen beyond, filling the kitchen with a dense and deathlike fog that quenched her eyes and poured into her ears with a devouring and oceanic roar.

For a century she was submerged beneath an unfathomable tide of darkness; rocked this way and that by the vast swells of a confused and troubled sea of thought, never calming to expression, but vexed and vague—a seething oblivion in which was no repose. Then the measured hammering of a great clock, whose titanic tick-tack struck with reiterated persistence upon her brain, brought her back to the consciousness so summarily quitted. For all that a century had elapsed since she sank beneath the waters of noisy oblivion, she awoke—when they subsided—to find herself in the same chair. The same sunlight, undisturbed, fell diagonally through the open doorway across the fiber mat to the corner of her chair. The same flies buzzed; the same flames leaped up from the red grate with fiendish elasticity, and lost themselves in the velvet profundity of the spacious flue. Nothing had changed, save that the relentless pendulum skipped back from her brain to the ponderous eight-day clock as her eyes let in the sunlight and her ears external

sounds, and tick-tacked there with leisured impartiality and detachment. The knife and pie-dish, too, were on the table, and the carrier's wife, on her knees upon the red-tiled floor, rubbed Blanche's two limp hands with her own two robust and floury members.

It was true, then! Yes. It was true. God help her, it was true. The hot kitchen, the flaming fire, the pancheon on the fender; the icy, deathlike sweat that the fog had left upon her brow; the strenuous, floury hands seeking to clap animation into her own; the eyes of the carrier's wife fixed vigilantly upon hers—all these and the frustrated sinking of that blest momentary hope within her deluded bosom told her that it was true. She was Blanche, the Vicar's daughter. These agonized thinkings were no dream; no insubstantial nightmare to be blown aside with the breath of grateful and incredible relief. They were herself, her very self. Thus she was ever awakening, even in her wakeful moments, from some instantaneous dream of unreality, to relapse with a groan of the heart upon the pallet of naked, shameful fact.

For awhile, taking refuge in dissimulation, she suffered the chafing hands to carry on their work, and the solicitous lips to exhort her. It was easier, simpler to sit still, without speech or conscious look, and feel these energetic efforts expended for her faculties' recall; hear herself called on by name and supplication; to be told that the carrier's wife was "only me," and didn't Blanche know her? and "My word, she'd been as near off as could be! and Just sit up with herself for a minute while the ministrant had time to draw her a drink of water. Anon, after a brief eclipse of the doorway sunlight and the urgent rattle of a pump handle, the cold wet rim of a dripping tumbler was pressed to her lips, and she heard herself bidden to "tek a good sup o' this." She sipped and turned away her head, but the insistent tumbler followed her rejective mouth and pressed its chill wet lip against her own, and once more she sipped and shook her head, and so after this manner for some

time. Then, a sudden furious clamor coming from the oven and steam bursting out on all sides of the oven door, the tumbler withdrew incontinently to the table, and the carrier's wife, crying "Gracious! What's I thinking on?" possessed herself of a dish-cloth and ran to the scene of disturbance, where she wrought with the zeal of a fireman amid great clouds of smoke and vapor, snatching brown stew-pots and bubbling dishes from danger with as much desperation as if they had been human lives. Finally, the uproar quelled, she laid the dish-cloth down and resumed solicitude for her visitor, whose fixed and disinterested eyes had watched the fireside commotion as from another world—a world of trouble so vast and so remote that troubles such as these lost all proportion.

Whatever had Blanche been thinking of to be took, all sudden, like that? Why! It was not like Blanche to faint! Good gracious! She had never known Blanche to faint! Whatever was Blanche thinking of? But weather was oversetting for time o' year. Sun that hot, and kitchen that warm. More like summer than Martinmas. . . . And then, maybe, it was a day Blanche oughtn't to be doing a deal of anything at all by rights? Was it? It had used to be same wi' Ada before she got engaged, but she was a lot stronger noo. "Nay! . . . Surely ti goodness, lass! Whatever i' name o' fortune . . .?"

For the Blanche that had not been like Blanche to faint surprised the carrier's wife all suddenly by being so utterly unlike Blanche as to burst into tears. The despairing spirit of dissimulation, borne to ground by its own burden, surrendered unconditionally to sobs. Of what use was secrecy without solace; concealment bought at the price of suffering; victory whose very crown was thorns? Such victory as this had been her daily and her nightly portion. The victory of such secrecy, endured these many weeks, had sunk its acids through her bosom and corroded all her being. She had been led forth this day to make an end of it: to seek some partner for her trouble; some ear into which confession might be poured; some

friendly midwife of sorrow with whose aid her soul might be delivered of this dreadful secret that oppressed it.

XIV

THOSE incomprehensible tears of her own sex that melt the other sex to softness and straightway bring its strength to naught stir the shrewdest curiosities of woman in a moment.

For awhile, standing in the attitude in which Blanche's outburst had surprised her, with her floury hands extended and her mouth commiserately open, the carrier's wife studied the weeper in the chair. Her eye, filled with doubts and perplexities and anticipations, traveled over the girl's figure from head to toe—taking stock of the shaking hat and hair and the convulsed shoulders, and the large tears oozing through the wet spread fingers to fall impotently on the limp lap, and the sober stockings terminating in those inert and lifeless shoes. Trouble of this sort and in this guise was not unfamiliar to her experience. Her own family had furnished instances in her youthful days. When girls wept inconsolably without a cause it was time—experience had taught her—for mothers to tremble and bid their too complaisant eye remark the thing, by right, it should have seen before; for by such a route came trouble as a rule. But because suspicion (knowing itself at heart a base quality) shirks always to declare itself, and is unwilling to admit that it suspects; and because this was Blanche, and the Vicar's daughter, and such dire happenings as she had in mind were generally reserved by a selective Providence for humbler victims, she assumed her cheerfullest manner of bustling sympathy and voiced only the least consequential of the surmises at work within; bidding Blanche to "Come now, and don't cry! . . . Has father been scolding ye? Is it pianner?"

No answer came from the lips part hidden behind the two close-pressed hands.

"Diz he want ye ti play orgin i' choch? He dizn't?" Why! Maybe Blanche had had a bit of a quarrel wi' somebody? She hadn't?

She laid her hand—still floury, albeit she first wiped it with her apron—upon the girl's averted forehead, that even in that place of sun and flame and fiery oven felt burning hot, and said: "What's amiss wi' ye, Blanche? Come, lass! . . . Surely you can tell *me*!" and made attempt to lift the weeping face. "See! Let's look at ye. . . ." But the face, defended by the outspread fingers, resisted this effort to raise it, struggling against inspection. To one of the carrier's wife's experience such a sign of utter inconsolability was ominous. She relinquished the forehead with an air of bewilderment and, being driven back upon the last and largest and most assertive of all her suspicions, declared she didn't know what to think. "It fair caps me!" she affirmed. "I'se bet ti know what's matter wi' ye."

". . . If it had been *some* lasses," she said, and kept watch upon each tear that issued through the weeper's fingers, ". . . one mud 'a been inclined ti fancy something.

". . . Blanche?"

She dropped her voice to utter the name, and the name thus awfully uttered fell upon the owner of it more charged with horror and with doom than the loudest trump of wrath from heaven.

This was the moment that her terror had been apprehending all this tortured while, between the sickening desire to protract and the desperate impulse to precipitate—the inevitable moment when, assisted by some such commiserative ministration as the mother of her erstwhile friend lent her, she must be delivered of her secret at last, and give girth to the monstrous offspring of her fears.

And in that tremendous moment her secret was born.

All this despairing equivocation with her own self, this tem-

porizing with her own terrors, was at an end forever. In the twinkling of an eye she was altogether changed. Those residuary parts of her that had sustained the illusion of her old self against the new fell away in sediment of shame and grief. She was becoming a thing of pity and of scorn. And she wept over herself thus fallen: wept to know herself the object of that horrible commiseration in the altered voice of the carrier's wife; the object of that awful pity in her changed eye. In the first terrific pang of parturition, when the secret passed from her in this outburst of scalding tears, it was as though all her life were about to pass with it. If death were by the way of weeping she could have died that instant, for the desire of death was in her heart, and all her soul cried "Let me die."

Yet out of that first passionate desire for death a not less passionate desire for life was reborn within her: a despairing hunger for sunlight and for happiness; a yearning to live; to be Blanche once more. Not the irresponsible, thoughtless, careless Blanche, but a better, wiser, happier, more considerate and contented Blanche. Oh, how she would practice the piano henceforth! How she would play the organ; visit the sick! How she would strive to please her father—to do all that his wisdom demanded of her; to subject herself in all things to his will; seek all her happiness in his! . . . And her tears, set free afresh by poignant self-commiseration, flowed again.

The carrier's wife said, "Come! Come!" She wasn't to cry now! She wasn't to cry. Crying wouldn't do anybody any good. And perhaps things wasn't so bad as the weeper apprehended. . . . It mightn't be too late still. Was the weeper quite sure, for instance . . .

Aye! By the outgush of the weeper's tears and the despairing gesture of her head, the weeper was sure enough.

". . . Even married women can be mistook at times," the carrier's wife comforted her. "I'se been mistook myself—an' doctor was an' all. Maybe it's nobbut a chill. You've been

setting on damp grass. When did ye . . . How long have ye known?"

With the tears still sliding down her wet cheeks, that her two hands made now no further effort to stanch or intercept, Blanche—using her voice for the first time—said she didn't know—"A month . . ."

The carrier's wife, repeating the term of time with dismay in her looks and voice, exclaimed: "Good gracious! Never a month! You don't mean to say that, surely. . . . Why ever i' name o' fortune didn't ye speak before? You ought to 'a done. You ought tiv a telt somebody at once."

Blanche's tears, helplessly streaming, admitted the awful justice of the counsel.

"Who was there to tell? I couldn't tell father."

"You mud 'a telt *me*," the carrier's wife suggested.

". . . What good would it have done?"

"Why . . . it mud 'a eased your mind," the carrier's wife decided. "An' who knows but what we might 'a helped ye? Have ye done onnything at all?"

Blanche said, "I took something. It wasn't any good."

"Took something!" The carrier's wife showed a grave face at the suggestion. "Lawks, lass! But you shouldn't ought tiv a done that. You don't know what might have happened ye."

"I didn't care."

"What did ye tek?"

"It was in the *Sunday Sacred*. It's there every week. They said it never failed. . . ." Her tears flower faster again at the remembrance, resuffering all the tortures of that dread time—now incredibly remote—when the first forebodings of her awful circumstance swept over her. It had come in church. It had come during the chanting of the Evening Psalms, as though on a sudden Almighty God had wrung her by the heart and filled all her body with trembling sickness and dismay. Such trembling sickness and such dismay as she had never known before.

That night she had laughed no more than was requisite for her credit's sake—and to keep people from suspecting. She had even sung the hymns. She had intoned Amens. She had listened depairingly to each word of her father's sermon and tried her uttermost to like and understand it. She had done everything in her power to make friends with the Almighty. She had prayed; prayers full of promises and resolutions, beseeching that this thing should not be. And comfort had seemed to come to her by prayer, and a consoling voice from Heaven had seemed to speak to her, saying she was a silly fool, and what was there to be frightened of and why should anything happen her more than anybody else? And in the exuberance of her relief and her thankfulness to Heaven she had laughed again. But even before her father could pronounce the Benediction Heaven withdrew this brief-sent consolation, and all her fears descended in a flight: horrible, torturing fears that could be confided to nobody; fears that even she had to make profession of disbelieving, lest her credence might cause them to be true.

And then, when it seemed too plain that God would not grant her prayer and Heaven had no intent to help her, she had bestirred herself desperately on her own behalf. But the hour was gone by. Too much precious and irrecoverable time had been expended in prayer and vain appeals. She had reposed too great a confidence in Heaven. And as she wept now upon the carrier's chair, the sense of injustice permeated her tears and made them bitter. Why had she—of all girls in Whivvle—been thus selected by the wrath of God to sustain this ruthless judgment? Why should she, of all girls, have been picked out by His unjust forefinger to suffer this decree of shame and degradation? If God were just, if God were fair, God ought not to punish her for what so many did without compunction or penalty. Either he should punish all alike or none. And when the carrier's wife, sympathetically rebukeful, asked her, "Whatever were ye thinking on, Blanche? You ought tiv 'a took more

care than that, child. You ought tiv 'a thought on what mud come on it!" she was stung to tearful remonstrance, asking: "Why should it be me? . . . Other girls have done the same . . . lots of them. I know they have. And nothing happens *them*."

The carrier's wife, shocked by this sweeping accusation by reason of the measure of truth she knew to be resident in it, palliated her inner concurrence by a voice of gentle chiding, that bade Blanche "Wisht, Blanche! Wisht! You shouldn't talk like that. You shouldn't say syke things, child."

Blanche said: "I don't care how I talk now. Besides, it's true."

The carrier's wife, as an alternative to argument with all its pitfalls, said (though less assuredly), "Wisht, Blanche!" again; and "Surely . . . surely!" The remembrance that this was her own daughter's one-time confidante and friend imposed, beside, a wise discretion on her.

Blanche reiterated: "They do. Lots of times. And nothing happens. And now . . . because it's me . . ." She dashed away the tears from either cheek with reckless knuckles. ". . . I never did before. Never. And it isn't because I hadn't the chance. I had. Plenty. One of them was the Merensea curate. But I always said 'No; not that. . . .' And I never did. I was a long time before I would. Nearly a week. I said, 'What if anything was to happen!' And he said nothing would happen. He said he was sure. He gave me his word. It was a promise."

The carrier's wife, shaking her head with sage commiseration, said: "You shouldn't 'a gien 'way, lass. It's what they always say. It's same wi' 'em all—they'd promise anything at a time like that. That's how lasses comes ti ruin.

". . . Who is it, Blanche?"

Blanche said: "You know."

"You don't mean . . . Not Fondie?"

"No. Not him. . . . The other."

"Which other?" asked the carrier's wife—for, truth to tell, there had been so many of them. "You don't mean . . ." her credulity faltered even at the surmise, ". . . not young Squire fro' Mersham, surely!"

Once upon a time—and that not so many weeks ago—Blanche's pride would have uttered a protesting "Why not?" But now so utterly was the old pride broken that she only wept admission. And when pride heard the carrier's wife make those subdued noises expressive of deep concern for a calamity beyond redress, begging, "Don't say it's him, lass. Surely! It's a bad job. I'd liever it had been Fondie or anybody as soon as him!" pride only wept the faster, realizing full well without the deepened tone of pity in the speaker's voice how bad a job it was.

". . . Diz he know?"

The question framed already on the lips of the carrier's wife had been, "What diz he say?" but the avowal of those reinforced tears made the query superfluous. She asked instead, "Nay! ye don't mean. . . . Hasn't he answered ye? . . . Surely, surely! When did ye write tiv him?"

Pride, broken to the point that has no further reticence, replied: "A fortnight since."

"He ought tiv 'a answered by noo," the carrier's wife reflected helplessly. ". . . Time he's had. He oughtn't tiv 'a kept a lass waiting i' that fashion. He mud 'a known she'd be anxious ti hear something frev him." She dropped her voice once again to its most ominous level of inquiry:

"Diz father know? Hev ye gotten him telt yet?"

The question elicited a fresh flood of tears.

"Father ought ti know . . ." the voice of the carrier's wife decided, mercilessly pitiful. "He'll 'a ti be telt, Blanche."

Blanche, laboring to resist this awful dictate of destiny, ejected a desperate "No!" She knew the negative meant nothing; she knew it spared her no part of that dread moment, inevitable as death, when the truth to which she clung with

such tenacious fingers must be torn from her grasp and given to the world. Even her father in the end must know. Time and time again she had wakened with a start from broken and tormented slumber, and always, after the first cruel realization of the facts of self and circumstance, the cry of her distress had been:

"What will father say? Oh, what will father say?"

Out of the profounds of her distress she cried to the carrier's wife:

"I can't tell him. I won't tell him."

The carrier's wife, administering her dreadful counsel with a grave face as if it had been poison, said:

"You'd best tell him, Blanche. Sooner he's telt and better. He'll 'a ti know some time, lass, like everybody else. You can't keep it frev him much longer." She took stock of the girl's figure again, and asked: "When div ye expect . . .?"

Blanche, putting her hands before her face, exclaimed, "I don't know! I don't know . . ." as if she would shut out the horror of the prospect.

"Why, ye'll know tiv a week or two . . ." the carrier's wife replied. "When . . . when was it, lass? It couldn't be ni later nor October. That's when he went away."

Blanche murmured, "September . . ."

The carrier's wife began to tell off the months of doom upon her fingers: ". . . October, November, December. That's three. January, February, March . . . six. April . . . May . . ." She got no further in her dreadful reckoning, for Blanche's terrors, outstripping these fingered calculations, burst in upon her with a tortured, supplicative, "Don't!"

The carrier's wife took her thumb from the outspread fingers and shook her motherly head with mournful sagacity.

"Aye, my lass!" she told the weeper. "It's ower late ti say 'Don't' now. 'Don't' wean't alter things. You ought tiv 'a said 'Don't' sooner. You'd best get used tiv it."

With sudden desperation Blanche declared: "I won't. So

there. People shan't says things about me. I'll kill myself."

"Oh, wisht, wisht!" the carrier's wife admonished her, shocked by these violent consequences of her rebuke. "That's not way to talk, Blanche. You mustn't think syke wicked things. It only makes matters worse. Other lasses has had ti go through it."

Despair protested: "Not Vicars' daughters."

But by consideration of the hard cases of sisters in misfortune she coaxed the eye of trouble to perceive her own distress in a more reassuring perspective. It was true she was not the only one. Others had gone through this trial besides herself. It consoled her to count their local number with the aid of the carrier's wife, and find how numerous they were. What she suffered from was, after all, a common enough complaint. Hundreds had gone through it—some of them twice. Hundreds were going through it—unknown to her and she to them—in this very hour. Hundreds would go through it. Who knows? There was time even for Ada to be among their number. It was no more than measles or scarlet fever, that some contracted and some escaped—not by reason of anything worse or better in their own natures, but by the force of mere circumstance and adverse fortune. And, as the carrier's wife pointed out for her encouragement and comfort, it was no use looking trouble in the face. She had time before her. Months of time. Nearly a whole year of time. Oh, how precious time was become to her all at once! Time's meanest particles were worth the most infinite care and preservation now. Her life hung on them. If she could make moments into months they would not be too long for her. All her aim henceforth should be to intrigue Time to tarry; to delay the striking of that evil hour.

XV

O H, that unutterable afternoon—that even to think of hereafter made the soul sick!

It was a Thursday, the day before Hunmouth market. The carrier—who had been out with his light cart and galloway, collecting parcels for the early morning's journey on the morrow—came into the kitchen as she sat wet-eyed and tear-bedabbled. They heard him drive through the gatestead into the yard, where the covered rully stood in process of loading, with the decrepit ten-spell ladder propped precariously against its side—up which, and down again, Blanche had scrambled times without number. The carrier's wife cried, "Here's master!" as his footstep rang upon the cobbles, and Blanche's heart stopped beating in order that distress might listen the keener.

For each new footstep brought now its own terror; each face and voice and pair of eyes its own ordeal. Never had she been frightened of the carrier before, but now his footsteps dismayed her.

The doorway darkened with his presence; his tall bulk and broad shoulders shut out the fast-fading sunlight. He came into the kitchen with his customary "Noo, missus!" that at another time than this would have seemed full of kindness and comfortable welcome; a familiar prelude to genial words and laughter. But now welcome and kindliness were out of place in this kitchen, and laughter fled. Even his wife acknowledged the greeting with a subdued "Noo, Robert," in a voice that sought to impose its lowered tone restrainfully upon his own. It offered still another confirmation to the tear-stained figure of the validity of her distress. Voices had to be lowered for her now. Her trouble was no imaginary thing, but terrible and real. And her tears made ready to flow again before the newcomer, whose presence revived her old shames and apprehensions.

The carrier had already plunged into a query, "Diz thoo know . . .?" when his wife's pursed lips and altered voice brought his geniality to a standstill with a "Why? . . . What? . . ." He turned perplexed eyes in his vicinity to discover the cause of this sudden depression in domestic tone, and beheld the bowed figure of Trouble upon the chair by his elbow. Not that he recognized Trouble all at once by sight, even then, for Blanche's was the last semblance one would have looked for trouble to assume. Blanche was such a synonym for carelessness and laughter that his countenance—momentarily depressed out of instinctive deference to his wife's face and voice, and his own perplexity—put on its natural cheerfulness again, and he had addressed the figure with all his wonted geniality before his eye, reconciled to the subdued light of the kitchen, took in the significance of the bowed head, and the limp hands loosely holding the humid handkerchief between them, and the gleam of tear-blashed cheeks, with the question, "Nay . . . what's amiss wi' you, Blanche?" And then, since Blanche made no answer, he turned back upon the first cause of his perplexity and repeated the question to his wife, "What's amiss wi' lass?" at the same time that his wife interposed her "Hush wi' thee, Robert! Can't thoo see?"

"Can't thoo see?" the carrier echoed. "I can see lass is i' tears, if that's what thoo means."

"Nay, then, hod thy noise," his wife exhorted him. "Thoo's n' occasion ti mek things worse than they are." She added, ". . . Poor lass!" partly to let him know that Blanche was a true object of commiseration; partly, too, to whet his appetite for the secret at present withheld from him. He said: "Warse than they are! How bad are they, then? What's amiss wi' her?"

"Dean't ask."

"Why, I wean't ask if thoo says I'se not ti ask," the carrier complied. "I can do wi'oot askin so far as that gans . . ." and appeared so completely on the point of leaving the behest

uncombated that his wife—fearful of being taken too literally at her word, and so forfeiting for the time her chance of the disclosure she was burning to make—declared: “Why . . . thoo’ll ’a ti know some time, I expect. It’s no use me keeping it back fro’ thee.” She lowered her voice. “Blanche is i’ trouble.”

“I’ trouble!”

The mere sound of that familiar phrase set Blanche’s tears once more in motion, quickening their flow.

Oh, it was unthinkable! All this was some monstrous dream, from which she would awake presently with the power to laugh at it.

The carrier wasted no words of superfluous pity upon her; he let fall no sentiments of shocked commiseration. On the contrary, the intelligence lighted an interest in his face that had not been there before; an interest so keen as to sharpen his features almost to the point of a smile. He said to his wife, “She is? Dis thoo mean . . .?”

“Ayel” his wife assured him tersely. “. . . Thoo needn’t stare at her, Robert.”

The carrier, without abating his gaze, asked, “Who is staring?” in a tone of unperturbed remonstrance, and continued to look Blanche affably up and down as before. He even drew out the blackened, half-smoked pipe from his waistcoat pocket and put its stem complacently between his lips, striking a match upon his thigh the while, as if the situation merited some such comfortable adjunct to its enjoyment. “Why! What’s thoo been doing on, Blanche?”

His wife, jealous of the rights of her sex to interrogate at a time like this, and slightly resentful of her husband’s bluntly masculine intrusion, admonished him: “Let lass alone! Do. Dean’t ask syke questions. Thoo sees she’s i’ no fittle ti answer. Poor lass, poor lass!”

“Who is it?” the carrier demanded, and the weeper held her sobs in abeyance for a moment to hear the answer and his

reception of it. After all, pride had the gratification of knowing its downfall due to a gentleman. Her trouble owed nothing to any farmer's son with whom, perchance, a dozen of her girl acquaintances had exchanged kisses and escaped scot-free, but to a D'Alroy, who had singled her out from them all for this special signal of his favor. Even her father—though she shivered always at the thought of him—could say the less to her for this. A D'Alroy was a D'Alroy. The carrier, puffing stolidly at his pipe with his hands upon his hips, said, "Why! I mud 'a known, wi'oot asking, it was him." No more than that.

"Why . . ." the carrier decided, still sucking at his wheezy pipe, "he'll 'a ti do summut, missus!"

The declaration reassured her. It was true. He would have to do something. "Lass wean't 'a ti bear it all hersen." No, no. She would not have to bear it all herself. He would have to take his share. He would have to do something. She listened eagerly for some augmentation of comfort from the carrier's wife, but none came; only the sound of scraped pie-dishes and an interrogative "What'll he 'a ti do, Robert?" whereat hope sickened again and her hearing turned apprehensively to the carrier once more, expectant and fearful.

"Why, he'll 'a ti do summut, hooivver!" the carrier said. "He can't leave lass i' lurch. It's as mich his doing as hers."

It was true. It was as much his doing as hers. More, indeed. Much more. She had never wanted . . . She had said no. He had led her into it. It was his fault. Oh, it was all his fault; *his* fault.

". . . I doot he wean't marry her," the carrier's wife predicted in a lowered voice intended for her husband's ear only, but the quickened ear of Trouble intercepted the remark, and Trouble's tears acknowledged and confirmed it. He would not marry her. No. Being a D'Alroy *that* form of redress, at least, was debarred to him and shut to her. Not that she had ever looked for marriage, or thought of it. No word of marriage

had ever passed between them; no word of love even. Their attachment had been but physical; their affection only make-believe—to color fact, and suffuse reality with romance. Only that insatiable appetite for life had really led her wrong; that passion for physical vitality; the same fierce desire to do something with her body, to put it to some purpose, that Deacon Smeddy and others of the pious experienced in regard to the soul; not merely to possess it, but to be sensible of its possession and quicken it into an ardent instrument of life.

No. He would not marry her. Even if her folly in this miserable hour had dared to hope for such a sequel to her fears and outlet to her difficulties, the voice of the carrier's wife must have convinced her. Such a voice could not err. Conviction reigned in it. The carrier's wife uttered what she knew. Reason made her his mouthpiece, and the carrier scarcely contested her words.

"He's boon ti do summut for lass, hooivver!" he decided. "He'll 'a ti contribute ti maintenance. Rowbotham lass gets five shilling a week wi' yon bairn of hers. Blanche falls it get as mich—and more. Syke a fellow as him ought ti gie ten—an' not feel it."

She cried: "I don't want his money. I won't have it. I won't touch it."

Such unnatural sentiments shocked both hearers. The carrier's wife interposed her restraining "Wisht . . . wisht! Ye mun't say so, Blanche. It's bad ti tell yet what you'll want, or what you'll tek! Money'll come in useful. . . ."

"Aye. Tek all you can, Blanche," the carrier concurred. "You've a right tiv as mich as you can get oot'n him. . . ."

And then, where the sunlight had been in the doorway was a grayness; and the window-square, too, turned to an ashen gray; and the carrier's wife said days drew in sharp now, and dew was rising; and the carrier—his person merged by this time in the gathering obscurity of the fireside corner—rattled his pipe upon the hob and said, "Why . . . I mun away again,

missus!" His work wasn't done, by a deal. He'd to gan as far as Baulk Farm and back yet.

He crossed the kitchen floor with a certain ostentatious noisiness of footstep—withal deliberate—as though trying to convey to the visitor by this means the goodwill and sympathy that his tongue found difficult to utter. By the doorstep he paused, rubbing his unshaven chin and regarding the outer world with an air of baffled magnanimity—finally giving utterance to the hope that Blanche would cheer up, lass, and be i' better fittle after a bit. With which—though there seemed still some further wishes unsatisfied of utterance—he took his leave.

His departure roused sudden apprehension in the weeper's bosom. She raised her head and adjured the carrier's wife in an awestruck and suffocated voice:

"He won't tell anybody?"

"Not him!" the carrier's wife tersely assured her. "He'll 'a more sense."

"Tell him not to. He mustn't. Stop him."

The carrier's wife cried "Robert!" His voice from the far side of the yard, muffled by the mist and distance, responded:

"What noo, missus?"

She went to the doorway and said: "Thoo'll mind an' tell neabody!"

"Tell neabody what?"

"Why . . . thoo knows. About Blanche, yonder."

He answered: "Nay. Thoo needn't trouble thysen, missus. I s'll 'a summut else ti think on." But his answering voice lacked the ring of sincerity that the ear of Trouble listened for and needed. And so the carrier's wife (the weeper fancied) thought in turn, for after hesitating a moment she called "Robert! . . ." again, and Trouble hoped to hear the warning more emphatically imposed. But when the carrier responded with a briefer "Aye!" she only said, "If thoo sees Sarah thoo mun tell her Ada's i' 'Unmouth while Sattidy."

Only that. Trouble's affairs were mixed up with the affairs

of all the world, like the flies and currants in Harker's tea-cakes. They had not a sacred isolation of their own.

XVI

RAPIDLY the November twilight deepened; the darkness in the kitchen grew. The cat took up her contented place in the fender-nook by the oven door, upturning a rapt and hypocritical nose to the warm odors that escaped from the simmering shelves above. The carrier's wife, stooping to the fireplace for the intermittent light that spurted from the coals, cried, gracious her! It was tea-time already.

"Will father be expecting ye?"

The question brought the sitter from the apathy with a start of terror and resistance.

"I don't know. I don't care . . . what he's doing."

"Diz father know where you are?"

"No."

"Who's getting tea ready for him?"

"Nobody."

"Where's Alice?"

"Gone."

"Lawks! You don't say! When did she leave?"

"Last week."

The carrier's wife hesitated, holding an extra cup and saucer in irresolute hands.

"I doot I oughtn't ti keep ye," she said, "if there's only you ti get father his tea. It's close on five. Clock'll strike in a minute."

Blanche exclaimed: "I don't care. . . . I won't go back. I can't."

The carrier's wife viewed her visitor with mild perplexity.

"But you'll be forced ti go back some time, lass. You can't set there all night. Don't vex father, Blanche. Try and keep

him in a good temper noo. You'd best run your ways home and get tea fit."

Blanche said nothing, but all her attitude expressed the dogged refusal of despair.

The carrier's wife, still balancing the cup and saucer, as though in appeal to Blanche's better instincts, said: "It's not that I begrudge ye a cup o' tea, lass. Only I don't want father setting blame o' me, and telling me I ought tiv a' knawn better. . . . You've got ti face him, child. Sooner it's over and done wi', the better. Gan back an' get him telt. Tell him all. You'll feel a deal comfortabler when he knows."

Blanche, tremulous about the lips, and already shaken anew with the disturbance of violent emotion, burst out at length:

"How can I go back? . . . How can I tell him . . . *Him?*" Tears, less of distress than of mortification and resistance, shone upon her lashes once more. "I don't care. . . . I won't go back."

"Lawks, lass! What'll happen if you don't?"

"I don't care what happens."

"Father'll come and fetch you, most like."

"Let him fetch me."

The carrier's wife regarded her guest with silent scrutiny for awhile. Then, going nearer to the seated figure, she asked:

"Shall I gan back wi' ye, Blanche?"

Blanche made no sign.

"Shall I, lass? Is that what you mean?"

Yes. It was what she meant, though no word or motion admitted it. But her very immobility under the question expressed her surrender to it. All her state, now—even in resistance—was passive. Others must pilot her through the threatening sea of trouble that her own initiative had no heart to navigate. Her only part was to suffer and submit.

XVII

THE carrier's wife pushed her cup and saucer aside and said "Noo!" and Blanche's heart sank at the sound of it—for despair is rarely so desperate but it clings blindly to something that it cannot comprehend or specify; which is not hope—for hope, it knows, is hopeless—but a visionary hope of hope; a protraction of its wretchedness.

But still there was a little further respite for her fears. The carrier's wife must make all ready on the table for her husband's tea: place the pot upon the oven to brew against his return; provide for the safety of her cookery; don her mantle; pin her hat. The dog, liberated from his chain to protect the sanctity of the hearth and home, bounded into the kitchen with vehement barks of joy, brushing the cat out of her nook in the fender; and the cat, spitting horrible expletives, sped out into the night through the open door. Then, the lamp cautiously lowered, and a final look bestowed upon the kitchen—that elicited a responsive thudding of energetic self-assertion from the dog's tail—the carrier's wife said, "Come then, Blanche," and Blanche came, white-faced and wordless.

All the world had changed since she took her leave of it and walked into the carrier's kitchen this afternoon. Then the secret she bore was locked in her own bosom; she had been mistress, at least, of the factors of her own torment. But now she was delivered of it. It was no longer her own. It was everywhere, on all sides of her. The gray dusk visible beyond the threshold of the kitchen, seemed, to her fears, like some infinite spirit, silent, immobile, and ominous; it might have been her own secret, revealed at last in its immeasurable proportions. To the eye of fear, the night was not half dark enough. From the wicket-gate leading into the roadway she shrank back as if an asp had stung her:

"What's that!"

It was but a dog's bark in the village, mistaken by her terror for a voice. An awful voice; curt and peremptory and horrible. The carrier's wife, startled by the intensity of the girl's alarm, cried, "Lawks, lass!" and reassured her: "It's nowt. You hadn't need be frightened. I'se wi' ye." Blanche besought her: "Let's walk quick. Don't stop to talk to anybody. Say you're in a hurry." "Why, I'll walk as quick as my legs and this heavy cape'll let me," the carrier's wife agreed, "but I'se not si used ti walking nooadays as I was." Nevertheless, in disregard of her own caution, at every sound or sight of human life that should have hastened her, Blanche hesitated in her step as if—for little more—she would have turned and fled. And the silence between them added to the terror of the walk, and rendered it shameful and ignominious. Blanche had lost all power of dissimulation. No words—save words of startled concern or sudden anxiety—came to her bleached lips. Even her smile was gone, leaving the dry white teeth bared in an expression of hollow-cheeked and pinched concern that shunned the light and the stare of human eyes. Wherever a lamp gleamed from a naked window or imprinted the pattern of the curtain and window plant upon the drawn blind Blanche drew the carrier's wife and her own countenance away from the threatening beam of it. The clash of buckets and the interchange of voices and all the well-known sounds of life and industry contributory to that evening hour fell like menaces upon her hearing. For her this walk led through a world of enemies and foes. With each step taken her soul was in danger. She feared Fondie Bassiemoor, she feared the young gentleman of the aud hoose. There was no face, no voice, no footstep in Whivvle that did not invest itself with all that was most to be feared. One or two voices did, indeed, hail them as they passed; but these were docile, tractable voices that a pleasant greeting pacified and silenced. They came through the village without encounter, and drew up at the vicarage gate at last.

This was the gate. This was the hedge. This was the house beyond. . . . Seen now in the semi-obscurity of the November haze that magnified its contours and muffled the shapes of the surrounding trees to nebulous immensity, this home of hers assumed a drear and desolating semblance; the very habitation of despair. It was as though already the house had learned the secret Blanche brought with her, and stood plunged in stupefying gloom; indifferent to the deepening shades that invested it, and the night that gathered.

The carrier's wife wiped her face on a corner of her mantle. "My wod! It's close, lass. My forehead's all of a trickle." She, too, like the girl by her side, hesitated in face of the last brief stage of their journey, glad of some pretext for a moment's respite. That quality of impulsiveness which makes woman capable of undertaking at short notice missions that man's more deliberate judgment instructs him to decline had brought her here against the verdict of discretion.

Nevertheless, as she stood before the vicarage the temerity of her enterprise was borne in upon her. In her intimacy with Blanche and the zeal of her charitable curiosity she had overlooked how little the Vicar's self was really known to her. She felt herself now, at the Vicar's door, with too little standing to justify this interference. He might even confound her with the cause of his daughter's trouble, and involve her in the general condemnation pronounced by his wrath, saying she had too often taken sides with Blanche against his authority in the past, and connived at her derelictions of the duty his parental discipline had imposed on her. And to some extent—though not to this extreme degree—her conscience wavered under the indictment. She had not always held the Vicar up to Blanche with that respect she should have done, or inculcated the principles of obedience when Blanche brought the laughter of defiance and rebellion into her kitchen. "Why," she said to herself, in heart, ". . . it wasn't for me ti meddle betwixt Vicar and his daughter. He'd mebbe 'a blamed me if I had

'a done, and telt me ti mind my own business. And if he says aught ti me noo," she consoled herself, "I can tell him: 'Why, I nobbut came because Blanche wanted me to'—and I can gan back an' all if it dizn't suit him." With which, breaking the silence, she ventured to suggest, "Well! . . . Shall we gan i' 'oose, Blanche?" A thought of some comfort came to her, and lent more assurance to her tone: "Mebbe father's not at home, lass. Hoose looks dark."

But the comfort was of brief duration, for the moment they passed through the gate Blanche said, "Hush! Stop! There he is! . . ." with such insistence that the carrier's wife exclaimed, "Lawks, lass! What a start you gied me. That's second time. You shouldn't! Whereabouts is he?" Blanche whispered, "In sitting-room!" and the carrier's wife acknowledged, "Aye, he is an' all!" in a voice reciprocally hushed.

No blinds were drawn, and through the bleak bow-window the figure of Blanche's father could be seen, carrying a lighted candle in his hand. The solitary, naked flame seemed to illuminate only the desolation of the room and render its forlornness visible. Now the Vicar's bulk occluded it, and the shadow of his magnified head and shoulders blurred half the window; now it lit up his beard and profile with its feeble ray as he bore it to and fro—presenting to the watchers the illusion of two men in motion, one of them being of gigantic stature and proportions, who made the second seem pigmy by comparison.

The carrier's wife asked: "What's he doing? Can you see, Blanche?"

Blanche said: "Laying tea-things."

"Tea-things? Lawks, lass! Hasn't he had tea yet?"

"He can't have."

"We ought tiv 'a come sooner," the carrier's wife reflected. "I wanted ye to. It's late for father's tea. I'se jealous he'll be vexed. . . . Come, Blanche! We mun't keep him waiting onny longer."

Blanche answered with alarm, "Not by front door. Come

round by kitchen." To the tormented conscience of Trouble this more devious way seemed, in some curious wise, an easier approach; or rather, an evasion of the difficulty. The front door presented itself to Blanche as an impassable factor; an avenue too formidable for distress. But the kitchen door, when they stole round to it, proved as formidable as that they had avoided. Nay, more formidable indeed—for all that it stood open as though expectant of her. Its very expectancy looked terrifying. The sight of the kitchen walls, grimacing horribly in the firelight, made all her resolutions falter. She murmured in a voice of abject misery, "I can't! . . . I can't!"

"Nay!" the carrier's wife exhorted her, "but you can, lass, nobbut you try. Hod up, noo. It's bad enough, I know—dean't mek warse on it. Gan your ways in. Call 'Father.'"

Blanche horror-struck and impotent, said: "No, no. . . . You! You go first."

"Why? Kitchen's not mine ti walk in and oot on as I please," the carrier's wife objected. "What'll father say if he finds me stood i' 'oose as though it belonged me? Shall I gie a rap at door wi' my knuckles . . . just ti let him know we're here?"

Blanche pulled the hand away in sudden alarm. "Don't! Hush! He'll hear you."

"Why, we s'll 'a ti do summut, hooivver," the carrier's wife decided. "See ye. Kettle's aboil. Let's walk in, lass. Will you follow me if I gan first?"

Blanche conceded an uncertain "Yes."

"Why, then, come on wi' ye," the carrier's wife exclaimed. "Be brave. Mek a noise wi' your feet." Perhaps a vague misgiving as to the girl's courage under fire crossed her faith in her, for she added, "Here! Gie us your hand . . ." and drew her by this reluctant and trepid member into the firelit kitchen.

Even by the intermittent light of the flickering fire (replen-

ished recently, she saw, with newspaper and kindling) her domestic eyes were quick to note the disorder characterizing the Vicar's kitchen, and the gravity of her mission was for awhile lost sight of as she gazed in consternation at the pile of unwashed crockery on the central table.

"Goodness, Blanche! What's them? Not dinner pots . . . surely!"

Blanche, sensible of the latent rebuke, even through the many folds of her distress, responded breathlessly: "I hadn't time. . . . I came to see you as soon as I'd got sided. . . . Besides, I couldn't."

At another moment, perhaps, less urgent than this, the carrier's wife might have been unable to resist the placid impulse for kindly expostulation, for the kitchen was with her a sacred obligation, brooking neglect less credibly than prayer; but with the wish upon her lips—as though some intimation of their presence had reached him, they heard the Vicar from the profounds of the darkened house cry, "Blanche! . . ."

At the sound of her father's voice Blanche made a sudden movement of alarm, as though almost she had the panic thought to flee, but the carrier's wife caught her by the arm, saying, "Nay! Ye mun't gan. Ye mun't leave me wi' myself. Speak tiv him. Say 'Father.' Say it nice. Tell him I'se wi' you i' kitchen."

The Vicar's voice, more peremptorily, repeated, "Blanche," as though challenging the silence; "Is that you?"

"Aye, it's you!" the carrier's wife prompted her. "Tell him it's you—and me an' all. Sharp. He'll be vexed if you don't answer him."

But Blanche's bleached and flinching lips refused their office. For in what wise could they address this wronged and outraged parent?

And again the name was spoken.

The carrier's wife uttered an incredulous "Goodness, lass! . . . Answer him. Do. Whatever will he think o' *me!*"—

and in the same breath, with a sudden gasp of apprehension, "He's coming an' all! Here . . . let me be poking fire."

Bearing in his hand the candle that had lit his profile and cast his portentous shadow over the walls and windows of the sitting-room, the Vicar came down the passage to the kitchen, slurring the heels of his loose, worn slippers over the stone flags. He entered tentatively, peering over the candle's flame into the space beyond as though expectant of nothing more than the confirmation of his deluded senses—the firelit kitchen destitute of his daughter. The sight of her figure on the extreme fringe of wavering light emitted by his unsteady candle startled him. He said, "Who's there?" and "Blanche! . . ." and then, discerning that this silent figure on which his eye rested was in reality his daughter, his reassurance grew to indignation. "Why did you not answer me when I called? Where have you been? Do you know the time? . . . Is this the way you treat your father?"

He stopped at that abruptly, because—for the first time then—he became aware of the second figure in the kitchen, seeking to insinuate her presence by an apologetic usage of the kitchen poker, that should (at the same time) be vigorous enough to suggest she had been too deeply absorbed in this occupation to hear the words of paternal rebuke. The discovery was succeeded by a moment of silent constraint, broken by the carrier's wife, who said, "It's only me, sir," with an air of reducing her intrusive person to a minimum. In the keenness of his desire to justify without loss of time the mood which had governed his entry into the kitchen, the Vicar did not even stop to ask what errand had brought the carrier's wife at this unlikely hour and in this unlikely way. She had come (said he) at an unfavorable time; an unfavorable time, Mrs. Wickham. With which he plunged into an indictment of his daughter—the old familiar indictment of his daughter, that the carrier's wife and all the parish had heard before. From a long and tiring round amongst his parishioners this

afternoon he had returned to find the house deserted. No Alexis. No Blanche. No light. No sign of life. No tea upon the table. No fire in the kitchen. Clearly their return had been ill-timed. "Aye," said the carrier's wife to herself, "Blanche ought tiv 'a come when I telt her at first. This is no time ti tell him anything. Goodness only knows what he'll say noo." If the Vicar's indignation had been directed to this afternoon's offence alone, she might—perhaps—have tried to mitigate it; pleading, within the limits of respect, for the girl's sake, and taking upon herself some measure of the culpability for Blanche's late return. But in view of this appalling source of justification for parental anger in reserve, she dared not try to stem his displeasure, or seek appeasement of a wrath for whose fires such fearful fuel was in store. She, too, must be mute and bide the Vicar's time, like Blanche. On the days gone by this outburst on her father's part would have lent instant extenuation to the girl's fault, hardening rebellion in her bosom and expelling the last wavering impulse to repentance.

But now the power to hate or scorn was gone. Even with his anger she had no quarrel. If he had struck her, beaten her, abused her, she would have submitted to the castigation without a cry—so great was her consciousness of the wrong inflicted on him. For those who, like herself, can make no restitution have only their suffering to offer. In the olden days of blessed rebellion always there had been the figment of her independence to draw on as a last resource. As other daughters earned their living, so could she. But now, hanging over her was that which brought all dreams of independence to naught, and drove her, stricken, to this paternal prison for sanctuary and shelter; accepting of her father's charity just so much or just so little as he chose to give. The blow that had fallen upon her would fall scarcely less terribly on him. He would have to bear her shame with her; taste the bitter gall of her disgrace; suffer—who had not sinned—all that her waywardness had drawn upon their heads.

And realizing this in that enlightened hour of sorrow when all the soul seems lit up with the unbearable searching torches of shame, she had no word to offer him; no look for his eye; no posture to pit against his anger—nothing but her tears. As she had wept before the carrier's wife, and as she had wept before the carrier's self, so now she wept before the presence of this most injured, most righteous, most terrifying of fathers.

At first he did not descry her tears—did not divine that her attitude bore any other significance than the old rebellion to which he was accustomed. But then, looking from the carrier's wife toward his daughter with a gaze of extra condemnation that seemed as if it came reinforced with the visitor's concurrence, he perceived that this indicted daughter was in tears.

If he had found himself confronted with an angel he could not have betrayed more incredulous surprise. Such words of ostensible severity as were on his tongue when he turned toward her stayed unuttered. For awhile he could only stare over the dangerously inclined and circling candle—in the attempt to reconcile this unfamiliar manifestation with what he knew of his daughter. Tears had been the one token Blanche's pride had never yet surrendered to him. It was a fact he had frequently noted and deplored.

And these tears were not of anger. So much was evident even to the Vicar's unpenetrative faculties. She did not make her weeping the outlet of a passion that can find no proper vent in words. For perhaps the first time in his life the Vicar of Whivle stared perplexed upon this figure of a daughter who bore no resemblance to the Blanche he knew. From her he turned in helpless inquiry to the carrier's wife. "I don't understand. . . . What's this? What's the matter? What have I said? . . . Stop! Where are you going?"

For, urged by a terrific impulse to escape the dire consequences of his greater wrath incurred by the answer that hung, overwhelming, on the lips of the carrier's wife, Blanche swept

past him from the kitchen. She moved so swiftly that her approach, unclearly apprehended in that instant of perplexity by the paternal eye, had the semblance of an assault. For one brief moment, indeed, the Vicar almost believed—incredible though the idea appeared upon reflection—that his daughter was advancing on him in a paroxysm of defiant wrath. And then, through the door that had admitted him, she swept from sight without any sound save that of her own skirts, or any sign beyond the agitated flame of the candle that surged and guttered in the disturbed air. They heard—both of them, with their faces turned in the direction of her departure—the echo of her hurrying footsteps over the flags on which the Vicar's untidy slippers had shuffled their way; and after a brief while, betraying with what speed she had fled, the sound of the shutting of her bedroom door. The Vicar turned to the carrier's wife with a gesture of complete and justifiable despair.

His own daughter! Mrs. Wickham had seen for herself. Close on eighteen. Could not brook the least correction. Could not bear to be spoken to. That was his reward, Mrs. Wickham, for all the indulgence lavished upon his family; for all the expense and care she had cost him. . . . He almost gave it up, Mrs. Wickham; he almost gave it up. Indeed, he would have given it up years ago but for the remembrance of that One above to whom all must bow. . . .

In the flow of his aggrivement he scarcely heeded the tentative efforts of the carrier's wife to make herself modestly heard, and she had the opportunity to revise her utterances some half a dozen times before a vague import of what the visitor was saying filtered through his indignation to his imperfect understanding at last. The final form of her revision was: "I'se jealous Blanche has ower good cause to fret, sir."

He asked: "What sort of cause has her father then, Mrs. Wickham? You have seen for yourself, tonight." And even when the carrier's wife found courage to introduce that most portentous and tremendous word in the dictionary where the

destiny of daughters is concerned, letting her voice fall over its utterance, the better for his comprehension, he failed utterly to grasp the significance of it, saying, "Trouble!" as though trouble were a most diurnal and secular quality to which by this time his spirit was almost broken. "What has she been doing now, Mrs. Wickham? What new trial has she been bringing on her father?" For his understanding soared no higher than those petty troubles and parochial trials with which, through long years, his household had familiarized him. His pious resignation to his daughter's trouble revealed to the carrier's wife so deficient a conception of it that, as a preparation for the gravity and magniude of what she had to intimate, she had recourse to tears. Tears not only magnified the meaning of what her lips shirked to express, but they served to mitigate the crudity of the thing said, and to invoke an indulgence for the temerity of the speaker. So, with a corner of her mantle applied in turn to each distressed and apologetic eye, she emitted the tremendous truth:

"I'se jealous Blanche is like to be a mother, sir."

XVIII

THEY say, when the terrific truth burst upon his understanding, the Vicar rocked like a tree with the axe laid to its root.

So startling sudden was the change in him, and so deep the silence that served to frame and emphasize it, that the carrier's wife—shrinking, dismayed, from this consequence of her intervention—cried, Oh, sir! She didn't mean . . . she didn't think . . . she hadn't intended . . . and begged contrite forgiveness for having spoken suddener than maybe she ought.

From the lethargy of an understanding utterly overwhelmed by the force of its too sudden enlightenment the Vicar recovered to a state of indignant disbelief. He who taught and

preached as a matter of everyday acceptance the most prodigious dogmas that theology can impose stood aghast and outraged before this simple fact of physiology, attested by experience and a thousand textbooks; his cheeks on fire, and puffed and trembling with the force of his resentment. It was false. It was wicked. It was monstrous. It was impossible. His voice mounted with each word till it became his pulpit voice, all told. His stature swelled; his fist rose, emphatic and threatening. It seemed as if he sought to build out of the fabric of sheer vehemence a wall of buttressed indignation to keep this thing at bay; to terrify it into abject silence; to crush it down and tread it underfoot beneath the heel of outraged righteousness. Did Mrs. Wickham understand the gravity of the charge she uttered? Did she know what view the law took of such an abominable offense? Did she realize the liability that the mere repetition of such a slander incurred?

Who, he demanded, had dared to make such a scandalous aspersion on his daughter's character and honor? His voice and attitude held more in store, but she said, "Blanche, sir," and all the terrifying fabric of vehemence collapsed incontinently; the buttressed wall of indignation fell at a breath like a house of cards. Stricken silence swallowed up the pulpit voice. The Vicar's stature seemed to shrink to naught; his puffed cheeks withered; the admonitory fist became a hand, and the hand itself a mere lifeless member that shook when he held it in the air, like a dead leaf.

"... Blanche?"

The carrier's wife, still sniveling, answered: "Blanche told me herself, sir."

He would have challenged the declaration if despair had known but how; for over his countenance despair chased in a dozen desperate expressions of extremity, seeking how to rebut and overcome this shocking thing. If only he might have sacrificed his daughter's truth to save her chastity, and for

her honor's sake dishonored her tongue, he would have done so. But now, alas! when her untruthfulness might have been his stay and comfort and the solace of his declining days, he was bitterly unable to place reliance on it. The truth he had besought her all these years so earnestly to speak she had spoken now. He knew this was the truth. Truth's visage was too dreadful to be doubted. He could only seek consolation in his handkerchief, and plunge his face in its capacious folds, and blow into it tears and a note of utter submission and despair.

"... It has broken my heart," he said.

Beneath another roof, and in another's instance, he would have comforted Trouble with a text at least, laying the balm of some soothing Biblical unguent on the bruised and sorrowing heart. But here in his own kitchen, surrounded by these relics of unwashed crockery and these ruins of his own peace, he had no single text of comfort for himself. Not in all the pages of the Book he lived by was there a text to cover or alleviate so great a stroke as this. His thought was not of God, but of his neighbors—than whom no God can be more terrible—asking piteously: "What will people say? What will people think?" He was no longer the vicar of a parish and the interpreter of God's will to the afflicted, but a child, shedding secular tears for a secular sorrow and begging pathetically for secular guidance. "What is to be done? What is to be done?"—and striving with a child's instinct to shield himself from a culpability of which he was not charged, protesting: "They cannot blame *me*, Mrs. Wickham. They cannot blame *me*. I have done my best. I have struggled hard. Nobody knows how hard I have struggled. Doubly hard since my dear wife . . ." he made an effort to complete the sentence, "... dear wife died," and suffered himself to break down utterly at that, taking refuge in this deeper and more reputable sorrow, and with his face buried in his handkerchief turned to the dresser. No sound of sobbing escaped him. The shaking of his head and shoulders and the grotesque commotion of his body might

have represented laughter as forcibly as weeping to any onlooker ignorant of the cause of his emotion. Only the slamming of the front door put an abrupt end to a phase of grief promising to be prolonged. He blew his nose in haste at that and thrust away his handkerchief, saying, "My son! . . ." almost in a voice of guilty apprehension, and with an anxious look around the littered kitchen. "He will be wanting his tea."

The carrier's wife, quickened by his anxiety and reminded of the compromising evidence of her own wet eyes, improvised a no less rapid usage of her mantle and proffered respectfully to take her leave. "I'se jealous I'd best be going, sir. . . ." To her disappointment he did not say her nay. She lingered long enough, however, in the adjustment of her cape to participate in the entrance of Blanche's elder brother, who, calling noisily on Blanche's name and (alternately) on the name of Aleck, strode down the echoing passage to the kitchen bearing warfare in his foot, and burst upon the occupants with an aggressive violence that only partially melted in surprise. His hat was still upon his head, though thrown far back from his brow as an indication that its owner recognized himself within doors; and the remnant of an emaciated cigarette that he had lit last thing before leaving the compartment at the Whivvle Station burned close to his teeth, stuck by an edge of paper to his upper lip and moving all the while he apostrophized the kitchen unaffably: "What's up? Where's Blanche? Why isn't tea ready? Isn't Blanche in?"

The carrier's wife passed a hurried "Good evening, sir," to the Vicar under her breath, and took her leave through the kitchen door. No reciprocal "Good evening" echoed her own, and she deemed her departure already taken and accepted when, as though stirred to motion by this conclusive act, the Vicar called her name and, pursuing her impulsively to the kitchen door, imposed secrecy upon her with a lowered voice of urgent supplication.

"Mrs. Wickham . . . Mrs. Wickham! Not a word of this! I rely on you. . . . Not a word to any living soul!"

She said "Oh, sir!" as if the very suggestion of an act so foreign to her nature, and so remote from probability, shocked her. "You may be sure I shouldn't dream."

He said, still in the tremulous and urgent whisper:

"If this were to get out, you understand! If it were to be known. . . . I don't know what would happen. I daren't contemplate it. It would be disastrous."

She acquiesced in a voice that expressed to the full his own concern; in a voice that even outvied his own in its solemn recognition of the urgent necessity of silence. He could trust her. My word! Nobody would get to know nothing from her! He said, Thank her, in a voice of broken gratitude, and she said, Thank him, in a voice of broken reciprocity; and the Vicar returned into the littered kitchen, and the carrier's wife made her way round to the front gate, saying: "Why! But folk'll *have* to know. What's use trying to keep it frev 'em? They'll *have* to know. An' if I don't tell 'em, somebody else will—and get credit on it; and folk say it's not a bit of good me trying to make out I knew all time, then, because if I had 'a done I should 'a telt 'em. As though I'd tell anybody! My word! Vicar needn't 'a ta'en trouble to come to door for that. I'se as good to trust to as him."

And because the carrier's wife was so proudly sure of her own probity, and was so good to trust to, she took advantage of her hat and mantle to call "just here" and call "just there" on her way home; and at each house she stopped at her voice (after its first effusiveness of greeting) dropped to a whisper and became a mere simmer of sibilants, wreathing the flesh-pot of scandal. And before the night was out there was a guardian of Blanche's secret pledged to preserve its inviolability in nearly every home in Whivvle. And the carrier packed the secret with his other commodities—with his butter and eggs and curds and poultry—to traffic along the road to Hunmouth

on the morrow; whilst Blanche herself was still abed, and her father turned his troubled and tormented body with a groan between sheets destitute of peace or slumber.

XIX

BLANCHE lay face downward on her bed; face downward on her bed in the familiar and untidy bedroom overlooking Whivvle that had been her lair and sanctuary all these long and latter years. Here, in this close shelter of her very soul, she lay. The bed was still unmade, tossed and tumbled just as Trouble had slept in it last night, and Trouble's tired arms had thrown back the leaden coverlets this morning, and Trouble's white and languid legs had turned out from them to find the floor. Responding to the instinct that perceived her bedroom as a refuge, and associated her recourse to it with thoughts of flight and need of sanctuary, her first act on entering was to turn the lock and listen pantingly as though some feared pursuer were upon her heels. But all she heard was the accentuated thudding of her own heart. What she had fled from was here within her. No flight could outspeed, no craft elude it. And this room no longer was a sanctuary. She had come to it because . . .

. . . Because of what? Her own self, confronted with the question, scarcely knew. Because of an instinct intensified by long habit—an instinct derived unbrokenly from her childish days, that survived like the superstitions in a race, or those superannuated relics of religion to which, even against its credence and its reason, a people sometimes relapses in an hour of crisis through inability to act or think. She turned the lock, indeed, and then—after some moments of attention to her beating heart that baffled those other sounds she strained to hear—undid it once again. For the locked door pertained to days of independence and rebellion forever done with. She

had only escaped the kitchen and the carrier's wife, and the dismal accusation of her father's candle, and come here where the darkness of this secluded room might make confession tolerable; where, flung upon the bed, she might lie inert beneath his reproaches, and invite his mercy and compassion. He would follow her. Up the stairway that her feet had trod she would surely hear him coming, step by step; breathing with labor and indignation as he gripped the banisters, and making them creak with the weight of his emotion. He would call upon her by name. He would come to this door. He would enter . . .

So thinking, she flung herself upon the bed with her face in her folded arms and her dry eyes open, staring into the pillowy blackness below, pressed so close that each time her eyelids stirred she could hear the ruffle of her lashes on the calico. Her posture spoke despair. She plunged into the depths of this awful trouble as if it had been some silent pond, with water black enough and deep enough to drown her. And every now and then, when its depths would not retain her, but suffered the buoyancy of submerged thought to rise again to the surface of its inky and unfriendly bosom, she listened—oh! she listened. She lifted up her head and applied her ear to silence with the same fierce energy with which an infant lays its lips to the nipple that feeds it.

For if he had but come now, her penitence was ripe for him. Yes. In the semi-darkness of this room she could have cried, "Father . . . forgive me!" She could have wept, to show him her sorrow. She could have flung herself at his feet. She could have done all the things she had ever heard of or read about in the reading that had been, too long, her portion. But he did not come.

And then she heard the dull concussion of the front door, that sent a muffled tremor through the house, making her own door shake beneath its weight of pendent skirts, and jingling the disorderly toilet bottles on her varnished dressing-table.

She knew what the sound portended, and the anguished hope in her heart died down to a chill and hardening-despair, like the last embers of an unreplenished fire. Her brother had come back. The note of noisy self-assertion in his return struck a blow at the best parts in her; reawakened those remembered animosities that had seemed to lie buried beneath her mountainous grief. Her bosom rose in instinctive defiance; her heart hardened. Penitence, this moment back so humble and so prostrate, began to buckle on the armament of pride. Even in this hour of her extremity the old Blanche, not yet extinguished by the weight of her distress, strove to reassert herself against the new. She was ever a fighter; let her fight to the last—and fight the fiercer for these unequal odds. Tears of mortification tinged her lashes hotly; tears because her father had too long delayed; tears because her brother was too soon returned; tears of bitterness that his unwelcome coming had defrauded her of the peace of which her soul was in such need.

And now, Blanche knew, her ordeal could not be long delayed. Already her heart beat faster.

Something atmospheric; something that was not sound, but a stir in the silence, told her of the commotion that the tidings had aroused. They were moving in the kitchen. Her brother had demanded, "Where's Blanche?" with new significance and purpose. Her father had said, "Upstairs." Her brother, full of an anger that nothing in his own course of conduct justified, was asking, "What's she got to say for herself?" They were coming. Yes. She heard their steps already encroaching on the silence of the dark and crooked passage from the kitchen. Pride—mortally wounded, but still not dead—cried: "Lock the door! Don't be questioned by him! He's no right to come and question you. He does things as bad himself. What does he always come home of a night for now? Why does he always go out as soon as he's had his tea? So as he can go walking with Mi Foster. Everybody knows what he goes with her for."

Almost she obeyed this imperious voice of pride, but even then they were too close at hand—the stamping boots and shuffling slippers. She flung herself back upon the tumbled sheets and lay prone and silent—as though for all eternity she might have lain like that. Now they were at the door. She heard her brother's voice declare, "She's locked herself in, *I bet!*" and her soul, even out of its torment, experienced the satisfaction of his error and the desire to taunt him: "She hasn't, then! *Clever!* She's not frightened of you . . . if you think she is." Then, as his hand closed on the knob and found it unresistant, he corrected the prediction: "No, she hasn't. She knew jolly well better. The door's open. . . . *Blanche!*" And her father's voice repeated "*Blanche!*" The difference in the two calls upon her name was marked. In her brother's voice were injury and anger, devoid of all compassion. He pursued her distress with no more compunction than if it had been a rat; a thing to hunt down and destroy. No real righteousness was offended in him; only a bullying personal dignity was roused and cried, protesting, for cruel satisfaction and for blood. Her father's voice had trouble in it; it shook with the weight of a concern not wholly wrathful. The sound of this voice comforted and reassured her; the sound of the other—smiting all her trouble in the face—made Trouble's blood boil with unbefitting rage. Her father's voice she could have answered in a still small voice of sacrifice and propitiation; but not in the presence of this other that would deem her answer given equally to him, and even arrogate to himself the credit of compelling it. She would not answer him. She would not be compelled by him. He was not her father. She clenched her teeth and kept her silence. He shook the bed angrily by the footrail. "*Blanche! . . . Do you hear? You needn't kid like that. You're not asleep. What's all this about?*" Her father, bereft of the authority that was rightly his by this blustering usurper, made no attempt to regain the initiative from his son, but repeated in a voice that was meek

and helpless by comparison with the other, "Blanche. . . . Do you hear? . . . Blanche! I insist. . . ."

Oh, how feeble of authority her father was! Indignantly she saw it now. He had no will; no firmness; no moral courage. Anybody might sway him, lead him as they listed. He was a parent of wax; a wafer to melt and mold. And this bully at the bed-foot, shaking the tortured frame of her distress, was her brother. How she hated him! How she hated his hands and his voice, and the face she knew to be glaring at her with callous anger in the dark! Out of her passion she cried, "Shut up! You've no right to ask me things. You've no right to shout at me. Leave my bed alone." He shook it resentfully the harder, saying, "Why don't you answer? Damn it, I'll *make* you answer."

She said: "I won't answer you. Don't swear at me. I won't be sworn at by you. You're not father." She heard her father's voice, feebly remonstrative, interpose to say: No, no; they wanted no profanity at such a time as this. It was shocking enough without that. She said: "I won't be sworn at by him. I won't answer him. Send him away. He's no right shaking my bed and shouting at me."

Her father uttered his son's name protestingly: "Harold! . . . Harold!" Harold retorted: "Who are you Harolding? I've as good a right as her. If it's true, I've got to suffer for it—a jolly sight more than she has. *She* hasn't got to go to business every day and meet fellows, like I have. I'm in it as much as she is, and more." With his hands still tenacious of the foot-rail he thrust his face into the obscurity beyond. "Is it true? Do you hear? Is it true what Mrs. Wickham's just been telling father?"

She did not answer him. She would not answer him. All her body seemed to thrill with the passionate forces of resistance and denial. He said: "Where is she? Let's have a look at her!" The next moment there was the ripping sound of a match drawn tersely up his trousers leg. Only for a second

or two did the flame flutter precariously on its tiny stem, only for a second or two did it reveal the prostrate figure of utter Trouble, galvanized by its own spasmodic light into convulsive movement as though the girl's body shook despairingly upon the bed. Then, the flame burning down to the very fingers that held it, Blanche's brother dropped the charred stalk upon the carpet at the bed-foot and trod out its spark with the practiced sole of the smoker.

"It's true!" he exclaimed out of the intensified darkness in which the room was wrapped anew. "You can't deny it." He turned conclusively to his father. "There's no kid about it. It's true!"

XX

SHE heard their descending steps. Her hearing, clinging desperately to the sounds of them, was drawn out inconceivably fine. She heard the further hum of angry argument below; the slamming of the door that sent its muffled tremor through the house and jangled once again the bottles on her varnished dressing-table, succeeded by her brother's hurried footsteps to the gate. The sound of his unfettered freedom stirred all the bitterest jealousies in her blood. She had expected it; she had awaited it; she had listened for it. She was here, and he was there. She was bound to this miserable bed, and he was free to come and go. She knew where he was going. She knew with whom. She knew all they could tell her, and never did. And, burning with the vehemence of a wrong that can find for itself on earth no right, no justice, no redress, she hoped . . . Yes. Even in her extremity she hoped *that*. Awful though it was, she hoped *that*. Then they would know. Then they would understand.

Listening, with an ear acutely detached from all this turbulence of her thoughts, as though her very life depended on it,

she heard the rumble of the vicarage buggy as it rounded the house, and the slur of the butt-bellied pony's reluctant feet, and the voice of the Bullocky that led it, shouting "Way!" and "Woal!" and "Noo then!" and "Stand!" and "Hod up!" as an outlet to the anger that had been constrained against its will to drive the Vicar forth this evening, and that had contested this undesired duty, asking why it should be thrust upon his shoulders, and why couldn't Harold go?

"Because he's not!" his brother affirmed conclusively. And when the Bullocky inquired with sullen logic, "Then why should I?" was told, "Because you've got to"—submitting, though with the usual bad grace, to the ruling of this elder brother, whose right to dictate to the household on the strength of seniority, cigarettes, and a third-class season ticket to Hunmouth was slowly gaining ascendancy even over the Vicar's self. For it was by Harold's ordinance, rather than his own volition, that this vicarial journey was being undertaken. Harold said to his father, as he said to the Bullocky in turn, "You've got to go!" and the Vicar, lacking the courage to deny a duty so flatly postulated by his son, sniffled submission, agreeing it was the only course. The only course, and a terrible course for a man of his years and his position. An extreme and awful course. . . .

So extreme and so awful that only after the strictest inquiry, after all reasonable human doubt had been dispelled and Blanche had been spared nothing, was the course adopted. As her brother Harold put it: "Look here, Blanche. We want no kid about this. This is no time for kid, so don't give us any. What we want to know is: Who's let you in for this? Who's the chap?"

She said, swallowing her angry inclination to be mute: "You know. So what's the use of asking me again. I've told you."

"You say it's young D'Alroy."

Yes. She had said it once. But, as her pride flung out,

she shouldn't say it again. "You needn't believe me unless you like. I don't care."

He answered: "No. You don't. You haven't. That's plain enough. Everybody'll know that before long. It's us that have to care. Well . . . the guvnor's got to take the matter up, whoever it is. But we don't want him to go and make a fool of things. If it's young D'Alroy it is young D'Alroy. If it isn't, it isn't. It doesn't matter a damn to me, so far as that goes, who it is. You know; *we* don't. . . ." And since she made no answer, he added: "Or is there anybody else in it? If there is, say so and be sharp about it. I'm sick of the whole business."

The sharp sting of this fresh bolt, shot at a quarry already stricken, caused her remonstrant spirit to contend again.

". . . Do you think I'm like you, that goes with all sorts of girls? Do you think . . .?" There was more that followed; some of it audible, some of it inaudible beneath his angry denials; whilst the Vicar—stirred by these disclosures and the revelation of this vast and lurid area of life beyond that domestic region of it visible to his circumscribed parental eyes—threw out continuous words of deprecation and horror, as if he were bailing his soul of the contaminating intelligence that swamped it. "All right!" her brother flung at her in the end. "Then it's him. That's settled. You've said it. It's him. You'll have to stick to it now. It's young D'Alroy and nobody else. Very good. Then the guvnor'll go."

"Then the guvnor'll go." That was all. That was all vouchsafed to her. No sympathy. No pity. No kindness. Not even common civility—to such extent does the intimacy of family life dispense with those superfluous courtesies pertaining to the more distant intercourse of strangers.

So the guvnor, that had to go, went; knowing but little better why he went than Blanche, who listened for his going with bated breath upon her bed. Yet first she heard his footstep on the stairs, and her heart quickened at the sound—sounds

importing now so much to her—with anxious curiosity to know the cause. The footsteps faltered halfway, and his voice—completing their journey—came to her bedroom, supplicative rather than peremptory.

“Blanche! . . .”

She had a momentary struggle with her wounded pride to know whether her wounded pride in dignity could hear him, or yield acknowledgment to a single summons. He mounted another step.

“Blanche!”

She framed an artificial voice to answer “Yes?”—a voice strong enough to reach him, weak enough to express prostration; a voice that should be resentful, yet submissive, piteous yet proud; a voice that should epitomize herself, and lend a tongue to all she felt and suffered—for there is scarce a sorrow so humble and profound but decks itself with some poor dissimulation, and practices imposture in the struggle to attain its own ideal.

“Where are my handkerchiefs?”

Ah! Why had her wounded pride been fool enough to answer? Why had her wounded pride not known? Now her wounded pride could take no refuge in the dignity of silence, but must confess another fault—another ignominy to add to her indictment of shame. But no rebuke from the staircase embittered her avowal. Embittered it? “Condoned” had been a better word, for now his silence hurt her more than the sharpest of reproofs. She heard him breathe his dreary way downstairs again, whence, a moment later, the voice of the Bullocky rang up to her bedroom in a valedictory reminder: “. . . Think on thoo gets yon shot [shirt] o’ mine fittled by to-morrow, Blanche.”

Him she did not answer. Him she would not answer. The compulsory violence of his voice atoned for her father’s silent forbearance, and restored the resistance necessary to the true equipoise of a soul.

And with that they went, the two of them, leaving Trouble all alone. Not that Trouble feared to be so left. Trouble wasn't frightened. Trouble didn't care.

Trouble in one moment of daylight descries more terror than in all the inkiest hours of night. Never again did she want the day to break, the sun to shine. Let her be forever wrapped in thick nocturnal darkness from the prying of cruel, curious human eyes.

"I wish I was dead. . . . I wish I was dead."

XXI

THE vicarage buggy rumbled out upon the roadway with the shogging pony in the shafts, shedding a dim and dismal light from its solitary smoke-blurred lantern; and Whivvle saw and heard it go. Dod, deep in the second-best chair, with his slate in the pit of his stomach, heard the distant sound and knew from whose trap it issued, and who was driving. "It's Bullocky," said he. "Neabody else could set aud pony on like him." And Fondie, from the yard-end, saw it go, but (being Fondie) never gave the fact a thought or asked himself what night this was, or where the Vicar was likely to be driven at such a time or why the Bullocky (and not Blanche) accompanied him—as others did. And the carrier's wife heard it, pouncing on the sound as a cat pounces on a mouse, and threw open the kitchen door to hear it better; and shished her husband into silence, and kept him silent with an elevated flat hand whilst she listened, saying at last:

"It's him."

"Who's him?" the carrier inquired.

"Surely! . . . Thoo needn't ti ask. Vicar, o' course. Who else? He's off."

"Where's he off ti?"

"Why! Ti Mer sham an' all. Where else? Hark! Be still

wi' ye. What's use me stood listening if thoo keeps on knockin' yon aud pipe again grate? Aye they're just turning doon Mersham Road noo. My wod! I s'll not forget today. I'd give summut to know what he says tiv 'im!"

"Says tiv who?"

"Lawks-a-massye!" She shut the door with contempt on his obtuseness. "Ti Rector. About Blanche. Noo then, ask me next, 'What about her?' Thoo looks as if thoo meant to."

The carrier made no effort to rebut the charge. He merely smoked with his eye complacently on his pipe-bowl, and said: "Vicar needn't think he'll get a deal o' good by going *there*."

And if the Vicar could but have had the comfort of dissenting from the carrier's opinion, it might have mitigated the torments of this drive. For it was not a world he drove through; it was the devastated wreckage of one. The interminable sound of the buggy droned in his ears; before, behind, around, the vast November darkness wrapped him in; the fitful glimmer of the lamp, spread feebly forth and lighting nothing, served only to intensify his own bewilderment. He sat behind the butt-bellied pony, shaking impotently with the trap's motion; trying to collect his faculties for the interview impending, and to stir a torpid intelligence that asked but to sit in stupor and repeat mechanically when roused, "It cannot be. My daughter? It cannot be. It cannot really be."

They drove along the Mersham Road—the same road they had driven over to the fateful Show, when Blanche sat with them, prodding the pony onward with the impatient ferrule of her sunshade to the invocation, "Oh, get on! Do. It's sickening." The same road she had traversed to and fro innumerable times since then. They drove into the park. They passed the clump of giant trees beneath whose shelter at the Show the pony had been tethered, by the far gate, out into the village, and up to the rectory at last.

The lamplight, dismally stationary before the rectory gate,

awoke the Vicar from the lethargy in which he had been plunged. He raised his beard by an effort from his bosom, and let himself laboriously backward out of the narrow doorway of the tilted buggy; breathing as if he had walked the distance instead of driven; and toiling heavily, as though the thing upon his mind were lead. The Bullocky, his thought already homeward turned, asked, "How long will you be?"—and since his father only answered in a voice of the sepulcher, from which all hope of life was fled, "I do not know. . . . I do not know . . ." exhorted him to "look sharp"; as though Trouble had but one pace, or owed concern to any but itself. The austere correctness of the rectory gate, flanked by prim, impenetrable privet, and surmounted by the shrubbery trees—snobs, every one of them, and steeped in the high-nostriled formalism of Mer-sham—confronted Trouble disapprovingly. The well-raked drive, curving through clumps of exclusive rhododendron to where the shuttered rectory condescended to emit a gleam of lamplight through the fan above the door, offered no welcome, but crunched beneath the Vicar's diffident tread as if it shrank ostentatiously from such a lowly and dishonored contact. The house loomed unexpectant and remote; the beam of undissembled light above the doorway challenged his courage like an arched brow of frigid inquiry, discountenanced by which he groped his way beneath the porch and after infinite fingering in the gloom about him found the bell-pull at last, and elicited a deep reproving clangor from the regions of exclusiveness beyond. After awhile, when only silence had ensued, the unexpected sound of curtains thrown alternately and noisily aside, amid a rattle of wooden rings, struck his hearing with the force of a reprimand. By the time the door stood open he was reduced already to abjectness. His first words, when the flood of inner lamplight fell on him—broken only by the silhouette of the capped and aproned waiting-maid—were of apology. He regretted . . . He was sorry . . . He hoped . . . But the Rector? Was he . . . Could he . . . Would it

be possible? By the fact that the silhouette in the cap and apron stood aside and became a profile attenuated and respectful by the door-knob, he gathered that it was; it could be; it would—and doffed his flabby hat and stepped, with this in front of him, into the disconcerting comfort of the rectorial hall.

His *locus standi* in this house had ever been precarious; never assured. He had called and been admitted, and experienced the Rector's diffusive affability that sharpened to a friendly personal focus at no discoverable spot within their intercourse, and had gone forth gratified and cheered, and yet (in all things hospitable) unfed. But tonight of standing he had none; such standing as he had was crushed and overweighted by the purpose that had brought him—the covert purpose that caused the flabby hat to circulate disquietedly within his hands, and steeped him in a sense of shame and self-effacement as if his very entrance here had been by fraud. He divined, not by any service of his sorrowing and evasive eye, but rather through those pores of supersense that open everywhere within the consciousness at moments of acute abstraction and distress, the curtained comfort of the hall he stood in, and drew instinctively a contrast between this home of clockwork orthodoxy and convenience and the darkened house of littered trouble left behind him. A warm and appetizing scent of dinner filled the air, imprisoned behind the heavy folds of the curtains that the waiting-maid methodically drew again across the door. At any other moment such an odor would have done the Vicar good. He would have been grateful to it, as for a condescension. But now this patent evidence of high living overwhelmed him. Trouble had caused him to forget that the Rector dined. Such an errand as his own had chosen of all hours the least auspicious for its task. He clutched even at withdrawal. "If the Rector . . . I beg . . . Don't let me disturb . . ." But his apologetic murmur was respectfully ignored. The waiting-maid vanished soundlessly from the hall. In her hushed and shadowy subservience all the dignity of this house and the consideration due to it seemed

incarnated. Before such trained insight and experience as hers the Vicar felt his lack of social knowledge and assurance. He was, in truth, but a humble servant of the Lord. But a humble servant of the Great Master, with a devout sense of his own unworthiness and a vague misgiving that these parish-splashed boots in which he stood were no meet associates for the soft rug of Oriental richness; and breathing with a noisy spirit of self-effacement, and fingering the shabby softness of his hat, he rehearsed appropriate apologies for this untimely visit, while his eyes wandered uneasily amid the comfortable evidences of a well-appointed social environment so infinitely superior to his own. Antlered stags looked down upon him from the walls with liquid, mild and mournfully disdainful eyes; fox-masks, bearing their white fangs in a last perpetual grin, thrust forth their sharp and vicious muzzles from half a dozen points of vantage. On all hands prodigally displayed were tokens of the country-side; not the simple country-side of wandering botanist and pedestrian bud-lover, but that exclusive part of it reserved for squire and landed gentleman—those consecrated emblems of gun, rod, and chase. The all-pervading voice of the Rector's house spoke but one tongue, and that the boldly borrowed idiom of Mersham. The very stags and foxes, the stuffed hawks and bustards and heronsewes, appeared to proclaim their inseverable appurtenance to a class, and to inform this shambling denizen of another and inferior order:

“For such as you the good God did not create us. We serve the Squire of Mersham only; the Rector and his friends. . . .”

The maid came back and acknowledged the renewal of the Vicar's murmur by asking him to be so kind as follow her; with which she led him by a corridor beyond the staircase to the Rector's so-called study, bade him be seated, and vanished without comment on his saying he thanked her and preferred to stand. After driving it was a relief to stand. . . .

He knew the study of old. In the course of twenty years he must have been within it quite half a dozen times, or more,

and borne away on leaving some comfortable measure of conferred importance; the glow of gratified righteousness such as made Moses' face shine after interviewing the Bush. But that had been in the days of blessed independence, when as the Lord's anointed servant he came on the Lord's business and not on his miserable own. Since then the lineaments of the room had changed, like the hardening lines of a countenance when it first descries the mendicant behind the reputed guest. The heavy curtains of brocade, drawn closely across the two tall windows hung immobile from their gilded cornices, with stern detachment in their every fold. The Rector's writing-table, cumbered with its opulent accessories; its silver horseshoe calendar and clock; its Georgian candlesticks; its fox-paw and ivory paper-knife; its wax-tray and crested seal—all these arraigned his shuffling conscience as if they had been a bench of silent justices, and this a court. The bearskin rug, the massive curb of brass before the fireplace, the roomy grate in which a half-roasted pine log glowed beneath its deceptive snowy coverlet of ash, the regal fresh-cut chrysanthemums in their vases extended no portion of their comfort to the intruder. They were emblems, all of them, of a life to which he was an alien, that had nothing in common with his grievances and wrongs. Within this room the accents of Mersham were audible to his troubled hearing more emphatically than in the hall. Everything inside it spoke the Mersham tongue, conformed to the Mersham standard; staring with a cold incomprehension undisguised upon the spectacle of piety without a pedigree, or worth unsupported by social props. All the objects that the Rector's study displayed were exclusively secular. No texts shone upon the walls. Here were pictures in plenty, it is true, but the reverse of divine. Photographs of admirals and military men in uniform, and M.F.H.'s on horseback with the hounds and whippers-in in perspective; and views of Mersham in its glorious days; and over the Rector's writing-table, as though to inspire him when he looked up from the obese "Directory of the

Landed Gentry and Official Classes of the County," the familiar steel engraving of Sir Lancelot with his hat in his hand, got up by public subscription as a token of public esteem to express the public gratitude for the deep obligation under which his rent-roll and baronetcy laid the country. One of the photographs upon the Rector's bureau in a red morocco-leather frame—the portrait of a smooth-cheeked young gentleman with deep and languid eyes and the most symmetrical of brows—might have repaid the Vicar's closer observation had he but known whose identity this nameless portrait concealed. But the eye of Trouble was too diffident to mark minutely.

The sudden hum of voices, as though a door had somewhere opened, told him his period of waiting was at an end, and caused him to blow with more expectant heaviness. There were women's voices, too, he heard, and women's laughter, that seemed to say the Rector kept company here tonight; and his heart sank at the sound. He had done wrong to take his son's advice. His own feelings had been wiser. He should have waited; he should have slept over the object of his visit. This was no moment to importune the Rector with so sad a mission.

And then the reverberant voice of the Rector, out-topping all the hum of conversation like a rock above the fluctuating waters of the sea, resounded in the hall, painfully pronounced as though in the best of temper with itself, and brimming over with hospitable goodwill towards the company it had quitted—a lofty, elevated voice that seemed to sit on horseback and shout its sentiments afar; a voice overt and unashamed; a voice to make still huskier and subdued the voice that scraped apologetically for action behind the Vicar's beard. It boomed into the study, blowing the door open before it, full of regrets that were no regrets for having kept the caller waiting, and of a percussive greeting that was yet no greeting but indeed the dissolution of it.

Ah, Bellwood! What! Hadn't they asked him to sit down?

No, no. . . . Not at all. Quite right. Quite right. As a rule he had finished dinner by this time. . . . But tonight they had friends. The D'Alroys. Ah, no, not *those* D'Alroys—for the name had plunged the Vicar into a paroxysm of horrified regret—not the Mersham D'Alroys. Cousins of theirs. From Berkshire. He wouldn't hear of the Vicar's leaving. He could spare him some minutes. "You're not a troublesome customer, Bellwood. What little business you and I have to do doesn't take us very long as a rule." Stop. Let him first blaze the fire up a bit.

To the Vicar's troubled perception he seemed less a man than a center of compressive forces. It was as if all the county had come in with him, and the room were filled with the breezy ruthlessness of the hunting-field. The fox, cowering in his cover before the exuberant music of the pack, could not have apprehended with less relish that inevitable moment when, pressed by these well-bred pursuers, he must make his bolt into the open. No crimson hunting-coat, silk hat, or silver-mounted crop could have boded less of mercy for the fox than did the Rector's dinner jacket, cuff-links, and evening shoes to his quivering guest. And when he advanced upon the latter with a silver cigar case in his outstretched hand, not a pistol pointed at the Vicar's bosom could have sent through it a swifter qualm. No? He snapped the silver lid upon the Vicar's profuse rejection. "But you'll take a cup of coffee? Surely. . . . Coffee is just going into the drawing-room. Let me ring for a cup." The Vicar shrank from the suggestion with an alacrity almost precipitate. To accept hospitality in this house, knowing what errand brought him to it, seemed like fraudulence. Even to have to thank the Rector for a kindness declined added to the awful difficulty of the task before him. The Rector said "No?" again and, reopening the lid of the cigar case, nipped critically the stomach of a fat cigar and, confirming the selection, put it between his teeth and lit it.

"And now . . ." blowing out the intimation of his readiness

in a trumpet of smoke, "what can I . . . ? But do sit down." He annexed a term to the invitation, "At least for a moment," fearing perhaps that the Vicar's bowed and bulky person might find it as hard to rise again as now it did to sit. The Vicar said, "No, no. I assure you . . ." and then, fearing on his side that such obstinate refusal might cause his host offense and prejudice the words he had to say, sat uncomfortably on the indicated chair, guarding against any evidence of relaxation or repose. "You are very kind. Thank you. Thank you. I must not keep you from your friends. I did not intend . . ." He dropped his voice to a level commensurate with the degree of his distress. "I came upon a grievous errand . . ." he paused, ". . . a grievous errand!" and blew his nose upon the handkerchief of yesterday, in the vague hope that the Rector might help him in his difficulty with some assistant word. But the Rector, withdrawing the wet and bitten end of the cigar from his mouth, said no more than "Surely . . ." for the Vicar bred and fed no stock and farmed no glebe that the Rector knew of, and kept not any animal nearer to a horse than the superannuated vicarage pony to recommend him to the sympathies of proper-thinking men.

" . . . My daughter!" He stopped at that, because what needs must follow rose into his throat and choked him. His daughter? Had his daughter been the ninth daughter of the tenth son of the second cousin of a Clydesdale or a Hackney the Rector's brow would have grown smooth beneath enlightenment in a moment. But the daughter of a humble vicar, his neighbor of twenty years, took more visualizing. His brow creased as though the very word "daughter" were strange and unfamiliar. "Ah, to be sure!" He seemed to realize at last, with an effort, that this must be in fact the Vicar's daughter to whom the Vicar, with such manifest emotion, was alluding. "Not ill, I hope?"

"Not ill . . ." the Vicar murmured. "Worse than ill. Far worse than ill. In trouble. In terrible trouble and distress.

I have just left her. She is prostrate." He stumbled amid prevaricative phrases like a blind man, hoping to hit upon the right presentment of this dreadful case by accident and some eventual guidance of the hand of God; not daring to seek the Rector's eye that looked upon him curiously over the alternating red and gray of his cigar. ". . . I have just heard. . . . She has just told me. . . . I have learned the truth from her own lips. . . . It has taken all the spirit out of me. . . . My daughter has had a great wrong done to her."

The Rector contributed "Good gracious!" The comment was not destitute of deep concern, and the Vicar's flagging spirit drew courage from this sympathetic reception of his trouble. It touched him and made his tears begin to ooze. He said: "You can understand . . . the shock to me. After all these years. I am quite unstrung. It is a good thing there was no week-night service. I could not have undertaken it." He reverted to his daughter's case. "What is to be done? What is to be done?" And as yet he dared not name the name of D'Alroy.

The Rector displayed no doubt upon the matter. The advice he had for upwards of thirty years embodied in a formula and prescribed unhesitatingly to the parish in all such cases he tendered now. Done? There was but one thing to be done. "If the fellow's a decent, respectable fellow, Bellwood, the best thing is to marry 'em off at once," said he. "The sooner the better. Make no bones about it. Don't wait a week longer than necessary." It was a prescription that had answered admirably in Sir Lancelot's time. And as the Rector said, such marriages were not infrequently as fortunate as those contracted under less stringent circumstances. He could instance a score of cases where his intervention had saved the parish from a scandal and spared some foolish girl from lifelong shame. The Vicar, breathing in heavy stupefaction at this unlooked-for testimony of the Mersham Rector's principle, as if at the completion of a tenantry dinner, faltered his acknowledgment of the counsel

given, that he valued highly—valued more than he could say. But . . .

“But?” The Rector, mounted now upon his horse, threw the “but” impatiently aside as he would, in riding, have thrown open some Mersham tenant’s gate. This was no question of “buts.” “I stand no nonsense here,” said he; “and D’Alroy backs me up. Loyally up.” He asked concerning the delinquent “Who is he? A parishioner? I suppose your daughter told you. You know the fellow’s name?”

The Vicar’s breath grew heavier and heavier within his bosom. With a thickening of the veins about his neck and temples, he said, “I fear . . . I am afraid . . . this name will shock you no less deeply than it shocks me. My daughter . . . my daughter tells me”—he forced the clogging statement from his tongue with a crimson effort—“young Mr. D’Alroy.”

“What? . . . You mean to say?”

For just a moment preceding the Rector’s words there had been a silence so inert and weighty that it seemed as if not only the air in the Vicar of Whivvle’s lungs, but all the air in the room about him had been curdled. The sharp tone of remonstrant anger in the Rector’s voice pierced all this solidity of internal and exterior stuff, and reached the heart of his despair. “Your daughter dares to make such an accusation against my . . .” He would have liked to say “my nephew,” but he checked himself in time and substituted “Mr. D’Alroy’s son?” In the heat of his first indignation the color rose violently to his face and forehead, and the ash upon his shaken cigar spilled into powder on his knee. His indignation employed almost the same words that the Vicar’s indignation had made use of to the carrier’s wife. “It is monstrous!” he exclaimed. “I had held a higher opinion of you, Bellwood. I thought you had more self-respect than to lend yourself to such a disgraceful charge as this.” His righteous anger led him to flat denial. “It is abominable. I deny it. In D’Alroy’s name I repudiate it. It is untrue. It cannot, could not be true.” He flung, for

token of the unanswerable justice of his disbelief, the prodigious statement: "Mr. D'Alroy is a gentleman."

All his long-cumulating prejudices, all the old prerogatives and rights, all the old feudal abuses and securities, all the blind and indestructible confidence of the class it stood for blazed forth in the Rector's usage of the term. As his lips uttered it it seemed unarguable; final and supreme, like God Himself. And before this word of traditional authority, like a cringing dog in presence of the whip that has punished it, even the Vicar was obsequiously dumb; awed into habitual obedience and subjection by the fetish to which, his life long, he had bowed and scraped in slavery. For it left him no answer. He could not claim this title as his own, as if the quality it expressed were common to the world of true believers, like vulgar piety and faith. He was no gentleman himself. At heart he knew it; in secret he deplored it; it was his sad misfortune. He was but a humble servant of the Lord, emerged from small beginnings; serving God in shabby shoes for a stipend. Not for him was it to rebut the Rector's boast with the same proud, resolute assertion: "My daughter is a lady!" (would but to Heaven she had been!)—and so let these two contestant indignations stand squarely breast to breast. All he could do was to bow in instant recognition of the justness of the Rector's ruling and say, "I never doubted it. He bears an honored name," as a preliminary to the mild protesting of his daughter's truth; truth he had held so slightly till now. "You do not suggest . . . You would not ask me to disbelieve my daughter? Surely, sir! All the years I have known her . . . she has never been guilty of one falsehood that I can recall." He said it. Yes. In the hour of his anguish, with her happiness and his own at stake, he said it—just as any farmer's wife might righteously protest the freshness of uncertain eggs, or the juvenility of questionable chickens. And almost he believed it, to such extent does trouble obliterate the fine divisions betwixt truth and falsehood, and bring all reason into vague conformity with what the stricken

heart affirms. "My daughter's character is as dear to me . . . as sacred, as my own."

The Rector had already risen from his chair, and, having first tried the handle of the study door to reassure himself their privacy was protected, paced to and fro as if his indignant emotions demanded some vent of activity for their belief.

"Your daughter's character!" he said, and to her father the shape of his mouth was ominous and ugly. "It is a pity, Bellwood, both you and she did not think more about that before."

The awfulness of the insinuation, couched in such a voice and emanating from such a source, caused the Vicar's beard to creep. All the world seemed falling on his head; he stood bewildered, dazed, beneath the avalanche of dislodged and dislocated things that had once been facts, fixed permanently and securely (as he dreamed) in the firmament presided over by God.

". . . More about that before!" he echoed huskily. "How? Surely . . . you don't suggest . . ."

The Rector corrected him: "I do suggest. As a father, Bellwood, you may try your best to shelter your daughter's character. That's perhaps to be expected. It's only natural. But you don't tell me you've been ignorant of it. If so, the more fool you. You've known. Everybody's known. They've known it here in Mer sham. Don't tell me you haven't known in Whivvle."

The Vicar could only clutch impotently at the Rector's words: buoys to float his drowning intelligence, that his intelligence lacked strength to grasp or hold. ". . . Ignorant? . . . Everybody? . . . Mer sham?"

"You let your daughter run wild about the place," the Rector charged him. "Under no restraint or supervision whatever. Flying about all over, at any time she likes, with anybody she chooses—carpenters' sons and any sort of companion she cares to pick up." For one who had experienced such difficulty in visualizing the Vicar's daughter at the beginning of his inter-

view, he seemed surprisingly well informed respecting her. "And then . . . when this thing happens, as your own common sense might tell you it was quite likely to happen, you have the (I was going to say 'effrontery,' Bellwood, but I'll try and spare your feeling) you have the . . . the"—no alternative came to his tongue's aid—"well! . . . the impudence, if you like, to come here and lay a monstrous charge against the son of my friend D'Alroy. A fellow that's lived in this very house, under this very roof, and dined at my table, and enjoyed the intimate confidence and affection of both my wife and myself. It's an abominable charge. A charge that no nice-minded girl, possessed of any proper feeling whatever, would have dared or cared to make. You don't go to your joiners' shops and carpenters' sons. I suppose you've argued they're not worth the trouble. You come here. Here! To Mersham! . . . If it was anybody else but you, Bellwood, I tell you what: I wouldn't listen to 'em. I should have called it blackmail; rank blackmail. I'd have had 'em shown to the door in a moment; in a moment. D'Alroy's lawyers should have dealt with them."

The Vicar floundered helplessly beneath the Rector's indictment. "My dear sir . . . You may be sure. . . . If you will only hear me. . . . My daughter . . ."

"Your daughter? Why . . . your daughter does not even know young D'Alroy. I know he doesn't know her. I don't suppose he would know her by sight or name. What? At the Flower Show? Which Flower Show? The Mersham Flower Show? The Mersham Flower Show? Why! He was with me the whole time; I had my hand upon the dear fellow's shoulder most of it. He was never out of my sight a moment. *I can vouch for that.*" His eyes, roaming as he walked, fell upon the photograph on the writing-table which the Vicar's eye, internally preoccupied, had failed to note. He picked the portrait up and held it out with vindicating pride before his nonplused guest.

"There! Look! Is that a dishonorable face? Is there

anything mean or false or underhand about *that* face? Do you tell me those lips would sully themselves with dishonorable lies?"

The Vicar murmured: "Far be it from me to suggest any such thing. Far be it from me to attribute to young Mr. D'Alroy any but the highest and most honorable feelings." He knew they were honorable. He was sure they were honorable. It was his hope and trust and consolation that they were—and would remain—honorable. But his daughter . . .

The Rector, breaking in again the moment that the tribute to the merits of young Mr. D'Alroy failed, said, "When does she say she met him? When does she say this discreditable affair took place?" and when the Vicar began to the best of his ability to explain, cut into the explanation with a scathing, "Ah! I see. To be sure! The meetings were secret. Strictly secret. I could have guessed as much." He pushed the photograph afresh before the Vicar's watery attention. "Look. Look again. Is there anything secret about that face? Is that the sort of face to slink out of sight to keep clandestine appointments? Why! The very portrait gives such a charge the lie. That face has no cause to look ashamed. It is the face of a gentleman, who would scorn to stoop to any low or common intimacy with those beneath him. What? What do you say? *Knew* it? Who knew it?" And before the Vicar, thus interrogated, could reply, proceeded: "Should I not have been the first to notice such a thing if there were a particle of truth in it? Do you suppose he could have concealed such a thing from me, or my wife, with all the opportunities we had to study him, and learn to love and respect his manly, upright, honest character? To suggest such a thing only proves that you're not acquainted with *him*." He cast the imputation aside with contempt. "The mere idea is monstrous. Why, I tell you, Bellwood, the boy was scarcely a moment from my side. If he was not with me he was with my wife. Or if not with her, then he was riding in the park, or reading for his

Smalls. I can account for every moment of his time. I can pledge my reputation on his." He put down the photograph with conclusive impatience. "Your daughter is mistaken, Bellwood. You have been misinformed. There's some most regrettable error somewhere."

It seemed almost to the Vicar's laboring intelligence that the interview was to close at that; that he was to be turned away from the closed and padlocked gates of an exclusive justice that did not yield to such humble suppliants as he. And all at once, in sheer despair, humility burst its obsequious dam and his words gushed out, not noisily, but with the force of irresistible sincerity at last.

XXII

DID the Rector think he had driven here this evening against all the force of his repugnance and inclination without good cause? Did the Rector think these tears were wrung from him without a reason? No. The Rector did not think it; the Rector could not think it. He had proof. Undoubted proof. His son . . .

. . . Ah! His son. To be sure (said the Rector). His son!

. . . And not only his son. He did not depend alone on him. Others besides his son.

Ah! To be sure. The carpenter's son, for instance.

No. Not the carpenter's son. The village. The whole village. It had been common talk in every hearing but his own. His daughter had been seen in young Mr. D'Alroy's company not once alone but many times. It seems (though he had never been aware of it till now) that the young gentleman had bought his daughter chocolates; that they had spent whole afternoons together in Mersham Park. He poured out the overwhelming stream of facts upon which flood, at last,

the very ark of disbelief itself must eventually have floated.

The purpose of his words seemed served. All at once, where (before) a wall of solid obstinacy had opposed him, the wall was gone. His words no longer rebounded from a concrete front of prejudice and indignation, whose whole purpose was resistant. The Rector, it is true, retracted nothing, but his voice—when next he used it—spoke in a new and less dogmatic key; though what it lost in dogma, to be sure, it gained in reticence; the reticence of a dignity too august to frame regrets or phrase admissions.

"It comes to this, then," Dignity pronounced. "It is your daughter's word against the word of Mr. D'Alroy. It is a question of testimony."

The Vicar said, "Yes"; the Vicar said, "No." The Vicar, rocking after correctness like a capsized boat in its effort to right itself, said: "There is no question of any word against the other. It is a question of conscience." He begged the Rector to write to Mr. D'Alroy and acquaint him with the awful situation of his daughter. He begged the Rector—whom, in moments of more intimate address, he ventured to invoke as "My dear sir"—he begged the Rector to use his influence, to bring all his power to bear for good; and was obviously shaken when the Rector coldly interrogated: "For whose good? Up to the present we are going on nothing but assumption; on the assumption that Leonard D'Alroy will admit what you say. I have no knowledge that he will do anything of the kind. On the contrary, he may deny the whole thing."

The Vicar, shocked into expostulation, cried: "He cannot. My dear sir! . . . It is impossible. His conscience will not let him. He cannot be so base . . . so heartless!"

The Rector, with a slightly rising voice, repeated: "I say he *may* deny it. If it isn't true he will most certainly deny it. And whatever Leonard D'Alroy may say, I need not tell you that I shall implicitly believe him. His word with me, and with all who are acquainted with him, must be final. I shall

take that word against the word of all the tattlers in Whivle. I know his character too well to entertain the smallest doubt of it. No straighter gentleman ever sat a horse. And this I can vouch for; if Leonard D'Alroy had been as intimate a member of your household as he has been of mine, you would have shared my confidence."

The Vicar, sniffing with anxieties and apprehensions to which policy denied a voice, said he was very sure of it. If anything helped to console him during this dreadful hour it was the knowledge that he was in good hands; hands that would do everything, he knew, to save his daughter's honor and his own respectable name.

"I can count on you," he told the Rector with effusion. "You will do your best. You will implore him to remember the terrible position of my daughter. You will appeal to his best, his noblest feelings. Beseech him to admit the truth, at all costs and consequences."

The Rector commented tersely that not any words from him would be necessary to make the son of Edward D'Alroy act in accordance with those hereditary principles of truth and honor with which the House of Mersham had been so conspicuously associated in the past. D'Alroys had not to be coaxed to do their duty like parishioners.

The Vicar, laboring out of the pit into which his fatherly concern had plunged him, said: "No, no. My dear sir, I would not for one moment seem to doubt him. Forgive me if I spoke as though I did. But a word from you, from such an esteemed and trusted friend of the family"—he corrected himself in time—" . . . member of the family, I should have said . . . just one single word from you. It is all I ask. Your influence; your good influence—at a critical moment. My daughter . . ."—he used the handkerchief again—" . . . my daughter wrote to him after discovering the horrible condition she was in. He never answered her letter. You may imagine her distress. Not one single line of comfort or regret. . . ."

"If your daughter wrote actually as you say," the Rector commented sternly, "and got no answer, it only serves to convince me that her letter can have called for none. In such a case as this no answer may be the only one that a gentleman like Leonard D'Alroy, or any other gentleman in his position, could possibly return. I fear my influence would be merely wasted. . . ."

"No, no!" the Vicar interposed, raising a shocked and beseeching beard. "I beg of you. I may have been mistaken. I think I must have been mistaken. Surely she would not have written without consulting me. It may have been some other letter I had in mind. But this blow has bewildered me. I scarcely know what I say or hear. Everything is confusion. All seems to go round with me. . . ."

Yes. The Rector saw that. The Rector made allowance for that. But for this allowance he would have closed the conversation long ago. Naturally this interview was most painful for him; most painful and unpleasant. And as an indication that his clemency was slowly being exhausted he drew out his flat gold watch and puckered his mouth at the sight of it. "Good gracious! . . . I am afraid you will have to excuse me."

The Vicar, rising with labored alacrity, and yet showing the wild eyes of care that still ranged over the whole field of unsettled controversy, begged forgiveness for his encroachment on the Rector's time.

"There is one thing . . ." the Rector said, as he put the watch away, "I ought to mention. There is one thing I feel it incumbent on me to mention. I should be failing in my duty toward my friend D'Alroy and his son, no less than toward you and your daughter, if I did not mention it."

The introduction of the word "duty" restored assurance to the Vicar's shaking beard and hope to his anxious eye. "Speak, my dear sir," he said. "I beg you will speak. Speak freely. Anything you may think fit to say I shall be grateful for."

And the Rector, almost without waiting for the invitation, spoke. Assuming (said he) that the case was as his visitor had stated it (which, by the way, he must remind the Vicar he by no means accepted, and could not naturally accept on such *ex parte* showing) . . . assuming, however, for the sake of argument, that the facts of the case were ultimately found to be, roughly speaking, as the Vicar said they were . . . he was unsure, exactly, what the Vicar had sought to gain by calling upon him this evening; what precise form of remedy for his daughter's misconduct he had in mind.

The Vicar, dazed by this unexpected buffet to his confidence—that had been expectant of better things—echoed: "Misconduct? Surely, my dear sir . . . you don't suggest that my daughter is alone to blame?"

The Rector reiterated the contested word to justify it. "If your daughter had behaved herself like a lady, Bellwood," he said, "this would never have happened. You know as well as I can tell you that 'ladies don't do such things; aren't allowed to do 'em, in fact. But with a gentleman it's different. Naturally he has more liberty. A man can't be tied down by the same restrictions as a woman. The world makes allowances for acts of indiscretion on the part of young fellows—particularly for young fellows of good birth and breeding, with all the blood and mettle of their ancestors coursing in their veins. There's some excuse for them. It's only natural. And without some reasonable allowance on the world's part the world couldn't get on at all. A young fellow knows the indulgence he can count on, and a girl knows—or ought to know, if her parents do their duty by her—what risks she runs. You ought to have kept your daughter safe at home, Bellwood. Why, good gracious! a dog-fancier could have taught you better wisdom in the matter than you seem to have shown."

"I see . . . I see!" Under this homily the Vicar's bosom began to heave again. "It's my fault. I am to blame. The sin and punishment are mine."

The Rector minced no nice sentiment about it. "In a way they are," he said. "If you'd looked the possibility in the face from the first, and taken more care to guard against it, this thing would not have happened. But it has happened, and now you want to find somebody to take the blame and burden off your shoulders, and relieve your daughter of the disgrace which, after all, she has done no more than deserve. . . . You come to me. Why? With what object? What do you think is to be done now, at this late hour?"

The Vicar faltered. "Done? At this late hour? But surely . . . my dear sir . . . you said yourself what was to be done; as soon as possible. The only thing, you said. You can't have forgotten your words. . . ."

The Rector interrupted him unpromisingly: "You don't mean marriage?"

Deflected by the question into protective elusiveness, the Vicar said: "I don't know what I mean. My brain's in a whirl. . . . But you said . . . you certainly said, 'There's only one thing to be done. Marry her off as soon as possible . . . if he's a decent, respectable fellow.'"

"And if he was a decent, respectable fellow I should say so still," the Rector affirmed. "But what! Surely. Good gracious, Bellwood! You wouldn't call Leonard D'Alroy a decent, respectable fellow? I hope you'd have more sense. Your sense should tell you . . . that marriage is out of the question here."

"Out of the question!" The repetition in the Vicar's voice bore the guise of a groan.

"Utterly out of the question. What! Why, you've only to look the thing squarely in the face. The son of Edward D'Alroy to jeopardize all his prospects for a single indiscretion; to cap one folly with another, and suffer punishment for it all the days of his life? Come. Surely you see it, Bellwood. Just because your daughter has forgotten herself and allowed liberties that under no circumstances ought she to have allowed,

that's no reason why Leonard D'Alroy should be made to suffer for her lack of self-respect. It's like putting a premium on it. My goodness . . . if marriage is to be the price a young fellow in D'Alroy's position has to pay for a mere indiscretion on his part . . . why, he'd have all the girls in the neighborhood at his heels. You must see it. You can't fail to see it. Marriage between Leonard D'Alroy and your daughter isn't possible, Bellwood. The thing isn't on all fours."

Yes. The Vicar saw it, as his sniffles attested. He saw it now. He had seen it before. He had foreseen it and feared it from the first. That his daughter, out of consideration for mere misconduct, should be elevated to a position to which her most exemplary behavior could scarcely have promoted her; that an act of sinful immodesty should entitle her to the mistress-ship of Mersham, should make her the lawful wife of Edward D'Alroy's son—all this was fantastic and unreasonable. So fantastic and unreasonable that he bowed before the Rector's logic, saying submissively: "I know . . . I know. I never dreamed . . . I never thought . . . I never ventured to suggest . . ."

The Rector was obviously mollified by such evidence of reasonableness in his guest. It seemed, after all, he had done the Vicar an injustice. The confidence reposed in him all these years had not been utterly misplaced. He said: "Come, come, Bellwood. I knew you would see it. I made sure you would distinguish right from wrong, and take a proper view of the position. Why!"—with the return of confidence in his visitor's good feeling and perception he grew almost affable again—"the fellow's little more than a boy," and seemed to see no relevance in the Vicar's breathy comment that his daughter, too, was but a girl—a child. "All his college life's to come. Marriage? What! One might as well talk of breeding from a two-year-old. The idea's preposterous.

" . . . Besides," the Rector pointed out, "he's still a minor.

Even if he had the misguided chivalrous impulse to some such suicidal act—and you know what a generous-hearted fellow like that might do—it would be his father's duty not less than mine to dissuade him. Fellows like Leonard D'Alroy have not only themselves to think of; they haven't the freedom of these discontented workingmen that don't know how to appreciate it. They have their country and their social duties to consider. Mersham involves heavy responsibilities and obligations; too heavy for a boy like that. One can't be hard on him, whatever he does. When his time for marrying comes on, he won't be free to pick and choose just where he fancies, like ordinary fellows. The step will have to be most wisely and conscientiously deliberated. Many heads will be necessary to lend him guidance. He will need to have some fitting and suitable wife found for him who can help him to make good the ravages from which the estate has suffered, and restore Mersham to its proper position of eminence in the county. What would happen to us all if such a place as Mersham came to ruin I daren't really contemplate. It would be disastrous for everybody.

“ . . . There! I have been quite frank with you. I don't want to give you the least ground for reproaching me later, and telling me I had not made things clear. You see exactly how it is.”

Yes. The Vicar saw exactly how it was. He saw that the laws of human justice run only parallel with the lines of social distinction; that no class recognizes debts of honor incurred toward the class below. He saw that between his daughter's ruined name and happiness and the unstooping dignity of Mersham no compromise was possible. He saw—through the blurred but penetrative eye of Trouble—that nowhere in the code of human justice was there made the least provision for a bitter case like this. His daughter, having erred, must bear through life the stain and stigma of her erring; whilst her not less guilty partner passed scot-free—scarcely so much as tainted

by the sycophant breath of scandal that would not even dare to dull the polish of a D'Alroy's boots.

Yes. He saw; he saw. Within his bosom something hot and big and angry stirred, like a very righteousness roused, that struggled to be free, and took all his control to keep in check; a beast of vengeance, like a lion, that could have roared, and worried words to pieces. In his distress—so fervently does Trouble see and feel—he could have said things; he could have uttered truths revealed which would have caused the Rector inexpressible surprise, and forfeited forever the Rector's confidence and respect. And whatever else, and at whatever cost, he must not forfeit these. At the cost of truth, of dignity, he must subscribe obsequiously to the point for which the Rector stood, and even whilst losing his daughter's name retain at least the Rector's recognition and goodwill. So, he dared not upbraid; he was powerless to shift the burden of his daughter's shame to those other shoulders that should have borne it. No longer must he affirm she had been wronged. All he had liberty to do (with her whole life's happiness at stake) was to sigh deplorably and ask: "What will become of her? What will become of her? For her this spells ruin."

This dark view of the situation the Rector did not even argue; he seemed, with a certain reticent regret, to grant it. A situation had been created (he pointed out) which allowed of no remedy. "If Leonard D'Alroy were to do what you seem to suggest he ought to do," he said, "his life would be ruined not less than you say your daughter's will be." Besides, he showed the invalidity of the Vicar's argument. If Leonard D'Alroy had been the son of *some* parents, the Vicar would never for one moment have considered the purchase of his daughter's honor at such a price as marriage. He would have set her happiness before everything else, and would not have thought of covering one evil up with a greater. It behooved Bellwood to be fair. Bellwood must recognize the truth of what the Rector said. When this matter came to marriage

it was obvious that all the advantages were on the Vicar's side; it was easy for a man to talk about "duty" when his own interests were involved in it. But the Rector invited him to view the situation from the D'Alroy standpoint, and put his own one-sided feelings out of count.

To a conscientious eavesdropper it must have furnished matter for curious surprise that throughout this interview the name of God was never mentioned, nor was the least suggestion raised on either side of submitting the problem by prayer to the arbitrament of the Most High. From first to last they argued with the obstinate sincerity of men convinced that they have but themselves and their own exertions to depend on; not as ministers of God to whom God is no mere empty name but a God of whose almighty power and provision they had indisputable evidence each quarter-day. Had they knelt down in Christian amity upon the Rector's carpet, with their elbows on the Rector's chairs and their noses elevated to the Rector's corniced ceiling, and poured forth their united prayer to the Source from which all stipends and preferments come, one might have exclaimed, before this touching picture: "Here at least are no vain believers. Here at least are men who put in practice what they preach."

But no such illustration was provided. The Rector, looking not to God but to his watch, exclaimed, "And now! . . ." in a terminative voice; and the Vicar sniffled responsively, buttoning up the collar of his shabby coat. "I hope you won't think I'm dismissing you. But my friends . . ." They heard them, in effect, at that moment; for fingers strayed over the rectory piano, and a voice skirmished as if, with a little more encouragement, it might be prevailed on to sing.

The Vicar said: "No, no. Exactly . . . I understand. Pray don't come to the door."

"Believe me, Bellwood," said the Rector in a final spasm of commiseration, with his hand on the door-knob, "I'm heartily sorry about all this. Heartily sorry. If anything I could

have done would have prevented it . . . you may be sure I would have done it, for the sake of yourself and your family. If you'd only come before! I'd not the least idea."

They crossed the hall together, and the Rector threw back the heavy curtains and opened the door upon the hazy void beyond.

"What? Does it rain? No, no. You're all right. The glass is high. We shan't have rain yet a bit—though the turnips are shouting for it." He took the Vicar's flabby fingers in his own warm hand. "Good night, Bellwood!"—and in a lower voice: "Of course, you will make no reference to the subject of our talk. That is strictly between ourselves. Are you sure you can find your way?" The Vicar interposed a last despairing word: "You will write to him? You will do what you said you would?"

To be sure; to be sure. The Rector would not forget. "You're all right, are you? You can see? Very good. I'll get back to the drawing-room. They'll wonder what in the world's got me."

The door closed upon the Vicar's mumbling subscription: "By all means. Certainly, certainly. I beg . . ." and the Vicar, blinded with the Rectory lamplight to which his lowly eyes were unaccustomed, and bewildered with emotions that scarce knew whether they were of tearful resignation or bitter wrath, groped his way down the gravel drive beneath the yews and maples to where the dismal, soot-occluded lamp and a not less mood-blackened and smoldering Bullocky awaited him before the Rector's gate.

XXIII

BAD news travels faster than good, and cannot be stayed in its course. Blanche Bellwood beseeching the carrier's wife, and the carrier's wife imposing silence on her husband, and the Vicar admonishing his family "Not one

word of this," and the Rector reminding his departing guest, "This is strictly between ourselves," might have spared their breath—whatever its expenditure might spare their apprehension—for the misfortunes of our fellows are nearer to us than their joys, and one shall with as much vanity invoke the clouds to stay as strive to stop the progress of an ill report. A child before a runaway horse is in less peril than the honor of a girl before the rumor that runs it down. That night by far the greater part of Whivvle supped on Blanche Bellwood and her trouble; and those who missed her for this meal made a breakfast of the Vicar's daughter next morning. By forenoon she was in the Psalmist's hands:

. . . Woe to her! She obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in the Lord; she drew not near to her God. . . .

Her name acquired the sudden savor of a forbidden word; food for passion vicariously to feed on; only to mention it with a laugh formed one of the accepted passwords of local impropriety. Girls subjected to a too strenuous testimony of their swains' affection rebuked them sharply: "Noo then! Behave. I'se not Blanche Bellwood, think on." All the enemies her teeth and eyes and lips and laughter had ever made rose up to take revenge upon her now that she was fallen; saying they had foreseen how it would be; and it was only likely; and my word, if it was them, they would never dare to show their faces anywhere again. It was incredible the host of enemies she seemed to have, now when most of all she needed friends. Incredible how many grievances had smoldered all this while; how many sympathies had been estranged! Lord, how near to Thee the downfall of a fellow-creature brings us!

Betimes—as it was bound to do—the ill news traveled to the wheelwright's yard. Not that same night, it is true—for which the wheelwright's daughter bore it an undying grudge—

but the next morning found it there whilst yet her hair was screwed in curl-papers, tightly adhering to her head like marine bivalves to a groyne, and she took it straightway into the kitchen and tenged it venomously into Fondie Bassiemoor as if she had been a hornet and this ill news her sting, and he provocative of it, being her brother, crying: "A nice idea an' all!" and "Noo then, are you satisfied?" and "She needn't trouble to set face i' yard again. Decent folk would liever be wi'oot her."

On Fondie the dread news broke with less effect than if he had not made acquaintance with it the night before, and if he had not spent many of the so-called "sleeping hours" in reconciling his soul to this destructive truth and squaring his insolvent hopes with this terrific, unforeseen demand upon them.

"Well?" his sister demanded after awhile, when his silence seemed as if resolved to defraud her of the fruits of her initiative, "Thoo says nowt!" She was seized with a horrible misgiving. "Mebbe thoo knows already! Aye!" She plucked admission from his faltering gaze. "Thoo diz? Thoo can't look me fair i' face. Thoo knowed last night." Her indignation, roused by the discovery of her brother's baseness, knew no bounds, and would accept no appeasement from his troubled and remorseful lips. "Thoo came i' house and set at table, an' ate thy supper and went to bed, and never so much as a word. Think shame o' thysen, Fondie Bassiemoor, that leaves his own sister to be telt by other folk next morning, and to say 'No,' as fond as fond, when they ask her 'Hasn't she heard?'"

Fondie, foebly struggling to reduce her wrath, admitted: Why . . . he had thought . . . but who knows? . . . Maybe it wasn't so true as people said.

"Aye! *Thoo'll* side wi' her!" the injured female cried. "Thoo'll side wi' onybody sooner than thy sister. If it had been me, and not her, I should 'a been telt last night."

Her indignation, finding outlet through a dozen vents, and

assuming a dozen guises during the meal, blazed out again when Fondie rose, with silence on his lips and disquiet in his eye, and replaced the wooden chair against the kitchen wall. "Diz thoo mean to waste yon meat?"

He gazed remorsefully upon the platter. Why! He was sorry. There was more, he doubted, than his appetite could finish. His appetite wasn't in very grand fettle this morning. He didn't know why.

"An' yon tea? Mug's half full."

He looked contritely at the tea in turn, indicated by his sister's eye and forefinger, and as an act of penitent conciliation drank it off. It tasted of trouble—tepid and sickly; hopelessness in liquid form that he had to gulp at with all his strength of will and fortitude to get down. But he sucked it out of sight with a conscientious working of his Adam's apple, for his sister's sake, and went out into the gray dreariness of the mist-enveloped yard, and into the melancholy workshop that seemed this morning but a mortuary of stricken hopes and memories. To the unseeing outer world he looked unaltered. There was the familiar clasp-rule; there the blue drill trousers, greasily nearing the end of their week's wear; there the oily workaday cap. He said "Good day"; he answered "Thank ye. How's yourself?" Nobody external to his own soul and gazing at him through the material eye could have divined that all the elaborate structure of his inner life was overthrown, and that within were ruin, sorrow, and despair. Not even his sister realized how much this matter meant to him, and with what crushing weight it lay upon his heart, although her woman's instinct angrily suspected it, and she probed his outward composure critically from time to time as she would have tested meat in the stew-pot with her fork, saying hard things about the fallen one designed to prick and wound him into some incautious word of self-betrayal. The utmost that he said at length—though sorer tried in spirit than she deemed—was her own name, coupled with a quiet supplication: "Anne . . .

please!" It was the only sign he gave, and even in giving it he was gone, as though in uttering this mournfullest of protests he had perceived afresh his own unworthiness to speak.

And in the yard and in the workshop it was the same. Every figure that passed beneath the dusty signboard bore the same news. After the first perfunctory greeting, out it came. "Why . . . what! It's a rum 'un, this, about yon Bellwood lass!" They hammered her name and character all morning upon his heart, shaping her this way and that; to this conclusion and the other. Every blow that fell on her smote him; every laugh that mocked her seared him too. And through it all he was silent, preferring to suffer rather than to speak. For what could he say? How could any words of his alter the thing that was, or revoke the judgment entered against her in the imperishable scroll of the Recording Angel above?

So, with his heart on fire and his soul suffering, he kept silence—though it was pain and grief to him. But when Joe Toyne of Near Ketterby came into the yard that afternoon with a brand-new cigar from the White Cow in the fold of his oxlike lip, imbued with the profane and licentious spirit of the company he had just quitted, Fondie Bassiemoor's self-control trembled within him. He knew by an instinct bordering on revelation—he knew that Silence could not keep silence longer; that an avenging wrath was suddenly loosened within him, that cried to him and to his conscience and to his silence and his self-control: "Let them say but another word against her. . . ."

And the other word was said, and Joe Toyne said it, apostrophizing the wheelwright's son with genial profanity through his beer-stained and tobacco-browned teeth; and in an instant the brace-bit fell from Fondie's hand and Fondie was advancing on him.

"Tek it back!"

The action on Fondie's part was so incalculable, and the command so irrelevant, that at first the offender could only

stare with the cigar between his thumb and finger and his mouth open, like a half stunned pig; blankly ignorant of the nature of the thing that was so summarily ordered to be "taken back," and never for one moment associating these words with the harmless jocularly that accused Fondie Bassiemoor of the fathership of the Vicar's daughter's distress—an imputation he ought rather to have been proud of. Nor was there anything in Fondie's mien to indicate a dignity offended or an anger roused. He advanced with unclenched fists and with singularly little change of color. His teeth were not set; his tongue did not protrude; his lip betrayed no tremor. But when he cried, "Tek it back!" a second time his voice was stronger and more peremptory, and neither Joe Toyne nor any other round about within the wheelwright's yard had any further doubt as to his meaning or intention. And the yard grew curiously and intently silent—more silent than Fondie's self had previously been—and all the heads within it turned one way, like leaves when a rainstorm threatens, for Joe Toyne's was a broad and brawny figure with the shoulders of a Christmas bullock and a fist like a ram's head; a fourteen-stone bulwark of a man, presenting a chest as broad and solid as the public-house wall.

"Tek it back thysen!" he roared, when the force of Fondie's presumption dawned upon him. "I s'll not tek it back for thee, nor nobody."

At least, that was the tenor and these were the least offensive words of what he said. Almost before the last of them had left his mouth the thunder that the turned heads had been awaiting broke more suddenly than the yard had ever dreamed. Joe Toyne, with the cigar stuck in the cleft of two outstretched fingers, seemed to reel and stagger where he stood as if the force of some tremendous hurricane had struck him. He spun first this way and then that, holding both arms incredulously before his face, and, still with these two petrified and useless members in the air, tripped backward all his length upon the

ground, where he rolled three times completely over and lay like a log.

The collapse of his fourteen stone of flesh and blood, that shook the soil it fell on, was so swift and unexpected that for a moment not a sound arose nor a head stirred. It seemed as though the whole yard had participated in the fall, and could not all at once collect its shaken faculties. There was a voice exclaimed, "By God! Thoo's killed him, Fondie." And there were those, indeed, besides his horrified self, who thought that Fondie had, and William Megson invoked all present to bear emphatic witness, "I'd nowt to do wi' it, think on." But the prostrate man, after lying for a moment on his face with his head in his folded arms, pushed the ground resentfully away from him as though not in the least indebted for its hospitality, and rose unsteadily to his feet, shaking himself sullenly free of the attentions of those who moved to help him. The cigar was missing from his fingers and from the corner of the mouth reserved for it—whence, instead, a smear of red blood oozed, with earth and chips of wood adhering; and he spat blood imprecatively upon the spot where he had so lately lain. Some believed he would have gone for Fondie Bassiemoor forthwith, and were surprised when he did not but only swore; telling themselves they thought Joe Toyne a fiercer man than that, and What? Why, he could 'a made two o' Fondie. And as for Fondie, before Joe Toyne had time to swear at him he was the old familiar, submissive, self-depreciatory Fondie once again, professing horror of his evil deed, and begging the victim of it to forgive him for an act of anger so unjustifiable and sinful. He even picked up the fallen remnant of Joe Toyne's cigar and tendered it to its rightful owner with a contrition touching to behold, and sighed resignedly when Joe Toyne smote the peace-offering from his fingers with a murderous blow of his fist and bade him, "Gan ti ——!"

"If by going there I could undo what I ha' done," he reflected publicly, speaking in sorrowful vernacular, and renounc-

ing all his aspirates as became one who had no further right to them, having so grievously offended, "I'd ask naught better than ti gan. I know I deserve to gan. I ought tiv 'a reproached him; not tiv 'a struck him. Reproach may turn a man's heart, but a blow nobbut hardens it. One can tek back words; one can't tek back a blow. It'll stand again me, I know, as long as I'se wick."

He spoke the truth. There are those who affirm that Fondie Bassiemoor grew into a man from this hour; and it is surprising the quantity and quality of respect accruing to him from one single act of violence. His fists won for him in half a minute a prestige that all his strivings after righteousness had failed to do; and if, thereafter, men were constrained to admit a strain of derogatory fondness in him, they tempered it with the admiring qualification, "But, my wod! He can use his hands an' all when he likes." To have knocked down Joe Toyne on earth may have stood terribly against him in the indictment of Heaven, but here below it was argued a proud accomplishment, and one of which no virtue need be ashamed. "He wanted knocking doon an' all!" was the verdict of not a few. "It's a pity but what Fondie hadn't knocked him doon afore." And let Fondie's humility do what it could henceforth, let it be as gentle as any sucking dove, its gentleness did not deceive, for the fist that has once smitten may smite again, like the dog that has once learned the use of its teeth; and many a good behavior owed more to a timely glance at Fondie's fists than to all the texts within the cover of the Book of Books. Even Joe Bassiemoor was mollified by this manifestation of ability on the part of his son, expressing his commendation in the form of a reproof by saying: "Couldn't thoo 'a knocked him doon anywheres but in yard? Diz thoo want to stop all trade there is?"

And Fondie's sister, not less stirred, kept alive the fame of his exploit, and fanned its sacred flame from time to time with the breath of reproaches, saying (for instance) at such moments

as the matter of fresh news might be in question: "Nay. Don't ask Fondie owt! Else, mebbe, he'll be knocking somebody else doon."

And her admiration of the force and capability of his fists was expressed by the prediction, frequently uttered, "Next time he diz it he'll be killing somebody"—a saying that Fondie's conscience took terribly to itself and pondered over, acknowledging the awful truth of the assertion, and seeing himself no better than a murderer in all but the fatal brand of Cain.

XXIV

THAT evening Fondie Bassiemoor had no heart for books; no heart for harmoniums; no heart for futile self-improvement. His soul seemed in exile, along with those vain hopes and aspirations that had once flattered it and paid it court. Learning was become a mockery, and good intent a scorn. He lacked even the heart to change his work-day clothes, but sat in them after the others had finished their tea, staring at the hieroglyphic tea leaves amid the liquefied sugar at the bottom of his cup with the inertness that knows not what to do, until his sister, proffering the question "Has thoo done?" whipped away his cup and saucer, taking assent for granted, and remonstratively observing that she could not reckon to wait all night to wash up tea-things while folk went to sleep over them; whereat he rose, rebuked, and sadly put away his chair. He went out to the workshop, already deep enveloped in the November evening gloom, and closed the paint-daubed doors behind him, and lit the lamp that hung above the bench, and drew a piece of deal board from the shavings and the well-worn stub of pencil from his waistcoat pocket, and then, as though initiative failed him further, relapsed despondently into a sigh.

The sigh must have been so prolonged as to partake, almost, of a trancelike nature, for it was not until the workshop door was thrown open and his name was called a second time, at close quarters, that he shook himself free of it with a start.

"Fondie! Hello!" It was the young gentleman from the aud hoose who hailed him. "What are you . . . I say! That lamp!" For it was in the last convulsive stages of asphyxia; black in the face and grimacing horribly; its contorted flame gasping for air. All the workshop was filled with the protesting reek of it, and smuts were falling like the damned. The young gentleman stood by Fondie's side, preserving an attentive silence throughout the operations of deliverance, and watched Fondie Bassiemoor replace the resuscitated lamp upon its hook above the bench with the self-reproachful comment, "I doubt I wasn't paying attention to her I should ha' done, sir." Both noticed the localism, and each had the thought to correct it, but neither did, and the young gentleman, after this momentary irresolution, adverted to his first query, "What are you doing?" He picked up the smut-bestrewn board from the bench and looked inquiringly at it. "This?" For there were marks and pencilings scored upon it of an abstruse and complicated nature. Fondie gazed at them too, with an eye of curiosity scarcely less intent. "I doubt I must have done, sir."

The young gentleman inquired, "What is it?"

"Why, it's bad to tell, sir," Fondie confessed. "It's more than one thing by looks of it. There looks to be a B in one place, and I think yon's a steam governor—but I wouldn't be sure." He decided that, in the main, it merely stood for scribblings, and could not claim—as you might say—any particular meaning in it at all, sir; and the young gentleman laid the board down on the bench once more and explained the reason of his coming. "*He* wants to see you tomorrow," he told Fondie, "about something; and I said I'd better come and let you know tonight. I said if I didn't you'd be away at Wark-

up's. I knew you were working there this week." Perhaps the fixed look of sorrow on Fondie's face caused him to fear a voiceless disapproval, for he added quickly: "I know it isn't true. But I was sick of being indoors. I've been stuck at it all day." He showed his inky forefinger and thumb for proof of it. "Look! You don't mind, do you?" By the light of recent happenings the young gentleman's offense—palliated already by the frank avowal of it—seemed venial. Fondie answered with a voice of deep and sorrowful conviction that it was not for him to mind.

"I wish I'd nothing more to mind than that, sir," he said; and in answer to the young gentleman's inevitable query, "What have you got to mind?" replied: "I struck a man this afternoon, sir."

The admission was as unexpected to his interlocutor as the act itself had been to the eye-witnesses of it.

"You!"

"I don't blame you, sir," Fondie agreed, his conscience envisaging reproof in the exclamation. "I've been saying same to myself all afternoon. It doesn't seem like me, nor it doesn't fit in with my pretensions. I say one thing and act another."

"Did you . . . did you strike him hard?" the young gentleman demanded. At the far back of the question seemed a fear that Fondie's answer when confided would prove a disappointment to expectation. ". . . Real hard, I mean? I suppose not."

"Not what you might call exactly hard, sir," Fondie told him, "I'm thankful to say; or I might be somewhere else now. But it was middling hard, sir, and hard enough. And more than once. I knocked poor fellow down."

"You did?" The tone of eagerness in the young gentleman's voice rose to exultation. "Well done, Fondie! Whatever for?"

"For a thing or nothing, sir. For something he said. For a few words."

"What sort of words?"

"I'd rather be excused from repeating them, sir."

"Bad words?"

"Why, some of them were bad words, and some of them were fair enough," Fondie specified with scrupulous exactitude. "I've bided worse in my time, and I ought tiv 'a bided these."

"Were they something about *you*?"

Fondie hesitated. "They were about somebody else, sir. Maybe for myself I shouldn't have minded them so much."

The altered tone of the voice that murmured "somebody else" removed what anonymity there might have been, and caused the young gentleman to utter an expectant "Who?"

"Miss Bellwood, sir."

"Blanche? . . . I thought as much. Was it anything . . ."

A sudden confidential urgency seemed to gather up the young gentleman's words like dried leaves agitated by a sudden electrical gust, and to sweep them forward with impetuous haste. "I say. . . . Look here, Fondie. . . . That just reminds me. There's something I meant asking you. That's partly why I came tonight." He had begun in an open voice of frank interrogation, but with each sentence the voice sank until it reached the level of his breath in the culminating question, "What's all this about Blanche?"

Fondie said, "We may hope it isn't true, sir." And then, as though he deemed such consolation unworthy of its high office, added, "Though I'm jealous it is, sir. I only wish I could think it wasn't."

"Yes. . . . But what *is* it?" the young gentleman persisted. "I heard them talking about it in old Smeddy's this morning. I had to go for some pressed beef. We hadn't anything else for dinner. And they were talking then. I couldn't make out who it was they were talking about, because they were talking in a sort of whisper. And old Smeddy blew his nose—you know the way—and shook his head, and from what I'd heard I felt sure it was Blanche, though they never mentioned

names. And as soon as they turned to go he told me what a lovely day it was, and how blessed we were in the weather. But, of course . . . I wasn't going to ask *him*. I haven't seen Blanche for ever such a long time. What's it all about, Fondie? Tell me. What's happened?"

"I'm jealous Miss Blanche is i' trouble, sir."

"Yes. That's what *they* said. But what *is* trouble. I used to think at one time it meant somebody dead; but it means something else, too, doesn't it? If it didn't, why did they drop their voices and talk as if it were something not to be talked about?" He lowered his own voice almost beseechingly and said: "I say. . . . Tell me what it really means, Fondie. That's a good fellow. I know there's something I don't quite understand. It makes one feel such a fool."

"Trouble, sir," Fondie expounded with painstaking conscientiousness, after modestly depreciating his ability to make so dark a matter clear, "with a young unmarried woman generally means a bairn. Either she's had one or she's going to have one, sir." And he begged the young gentleman to forgive the blunt directness of the definition, which—truth to tell—broke upon the latter's understanding like a thunderclap. .

". . . You don't surely mean . . . not Blanche!"

"They say so, sir."

"But . . . look here, Fondie," the young gentleman protested, in bewildered consternation, "I thought . . . I thought every child had to have a father."

"Every child has, sir," Fondie solemnly affirmed. "I expect this will have, an' all."

"But Blanche isn't married."

"No, sir, she isn't married," Fondie acquiesced. "That's where trouble is, sir. If she was only married it would be different then, sir."

The young gentleman, still smothered as it were in the cloak of a bewildering mystery many sizes too large for him, whose folds appeared too intricate for his disentanglement, threw

himself once again, in his more hurried voice, on Fondie Bassie-moor's friendship and enlightenment.

"Look here, Fondie. I say . . . I want you to tell me. I've often wanted to ask you. I know something, of course, and I've an idea about other things. But *he* never tells me anything. I can't talk with him. I can't ask him things like that. I've only got the dictionary and books. And the dictionary isn't any good. It tells you nothing, except what you know. It only sends you from one word to another and back again, till you're sick of hunting them up. It makes one feel such a fool. There are puzzling things . . . some things in books that one can't understand. I remember . . . in the *Sunday Sacred*, No. 121, 'Lady Laura's Elopement; or, A Sinister Secret,' there was a passage I couldn't make out. Somebody had put a mark against it in pencil. It was where Lady Laura said good-bye to the coachman (who was her sweetheart in disguise) by the blasted elder on the moor. He asked her to keep their secret faithfully till he came back from Australia, where the real murderer of Sir Roger was. And she said, 'Arthur . . . I *cannot* keep our secret. Before another year has flown all the world must share it.' I couldn't make that out a bit, for I didn't see why—if she really loved him, and particularly if he were Lord Orford's eldest son, as he said he was—why she couldn't have kept their secret for three years, if he wanted. I told Blanche so. And Blanche said, 'You *are* a silly fool!' and laughed so much that I was forced to say 'Of course I did' when she asked me, 'Don't you know what it means?' I didn't really, though. Not quite. Sometimes I thought I did, but then something else turned up to upset it. I've often wanted to ask you, but I always shirked it when the time came, for fear of looking a fool. . . . But tonight I thought . . . I made up my mind. I wish you'd tell me lots of things. It's no good. I can't go on like this—pretending. I shall have to know some time." His voice, inspired by the desire for most intimate and secret knowledge, sank to a hum;

an assiduous, beelike murmur, hovering from flower to flower of the garden of forbidden wisdom, and sipping thirstily at these sweet and deadly nectars deep down within the throats of the fascinating flowers of life—flowers from which Blanche Bellwood had already drunk to her undoing. As an instructor in physiology and interpreter of biogenetic mysteries Fondie was not, perhaps, all-satisfying—albeit conscientious to a fault. His native modesty shrank from definition, and he sought to wrap too many garments over the shoulders of naked truth.

But at last sufficient of the young gentleman's darkness was made light to enable him to view this awful thing with something of Fondie's vision, and speak of it with something of Fondie's voice, and gaze with something of Fondie's consternation at a tragedy involving the ruin of so many hopes. That the romantic dream-world long inhabited with Fondie Bassie-moor was irretrievably shattered he perceived beyond a doubt. His deep sense of the magnitude of the disaster was perhaps, for him, fascinatingly tempered by the new knowledge through which he beheld it, viewing life for the first time from this fresh window that gave out upon a prospect puzzlingly screened from him before. And in this unfettered wideness of a purview made possible for him by what had happened his spirit may, indeed, have been for the moment stirred less by despairing sorrow than by wonder; but he had no misapprehension as to the despair and sorrow of his friend. Blanche was forever now removed from him. The idol of Fondie's fervent hope and aspiration was fallen; the object of his worship shattered. Words expressive of the troubled sympathies and condolences stirring in the young gentleman's bosom failed, but tongue-tied friendship put forth an impulsive hand and wrung Fondie's strong, warm fingers in the shadow of the bench, saying unsteadily (the sacrament being consummated):

"I say . . . I'm sorry, Fondie. . . . I'm awfully sorry. You can't tell how sorry. . . ."

Touched by so beautiful a tribute of friendship, Fondie's

voice faltered reciprocally beneath the load of gratitude it sought to bear and could not.

"Thank you, sir . . ." he said. In his heart was infinitely more than this, but the sorrow that unseals the voice of the soul locks the passage of the lips. For awhile both he and the young gentleman stood in the dim-lit spaciousness of the workshop without movement, and said no word. Even the familiar objects of their friendship—the clamp, the planes, and saws and shavings—in this unnatural light seemed soulless and inanimate, as though they, too, had partaken of the change, and showed it after their manner. If the young gentleman had not possessed the memory of innumerable bright sunful days to counteract the present feeling, he might almost have been disposed to deem the workshop a gloomy and depressing place. He was the first to break silence, asking:

"What shall you do, Fondie?"

"Do, sir?" Fondie answered. Each spoke again in the low but unfaltering voice of sorrow recomposed and sure of itself. "I doubt there isn't a deal I can do. I doubt there isn't a deal of good I *could* do, now, by doing anything, sir. I struck a man this afternoon, sir. That's one thing I did. And I came into workshop tonight. . . . That's another. But whatever I do, I see very well I can't alter things. Things will go on as they are going, sir, for anything *I* can do."

He spoke not resentfully, for resentfulness was a quality that neither Fondie's heart could feel nor his lips express, as the young gentleman well knew; but with a sorrowing fatalism nearer to despair than his friend had ever known it.

"But you won't . . . you'll go on?" the young gentleman inquired, with a certain note of concern. "I mean . . . you won't give up. You'll try?"

Even the slight pause that followed the inquiry proved the validity of his concern.

"I don't know, sir," Fondie answered dispiritedly.

"Oh, but you *will*, Fondie! Surely you will. You won't

let this stop you. You'll go on—for my sake. Won't you?" Again Fondie did not immediately reply.

"I doubt it's not a deal of good me trying, for anybody's sake, sir," he said at length. "Trying only means make-believe. At least it's what it does with me, sir. First of all it's harmonium, and I make believe I can maybe some day play her. And then it's building organs—and I make believe I can build 'em, sir. Or it's inventing things, and I make believe I can invent 'em. And after that it's books, sir; and I make believe I can master 'em. And all while I walk about and make myself believe I'm somebody else, sir, a deal better than I've any right to be, as if make-believe could change a man. One time I'm organist o' Beeminster. I've been that for as much as a week together, and made believe I was drawing out stops and putting 'em back again every time I took up chisel and laid her down. And I've made believe to play all through Magnificat when I've been sat at tea-table. Another time I was building a three-manual organ in Hunmouth, sir, that was grandest organ in this part o' the country, and brought no end of folk to see and hear. And not content wi' reading books, sir, I've made believe to write 'em. I've wrote a grammar, sir, wi' my own name on front page, that scholars had to learn from at Whivvle School. Another time . . . I was land steward at Mer sham, sir, thanks to your goodness, and drove about estate in a high cart, and had folks touch their caps to me. . . ." He laughed. Fondie laughed. Not a laugh of irony or bitterness, but a smileless laugh of almost pitying acknowledgment of disillusioned folly. "This time, sir, I almost think, now I'm myself, I'd better stay myself for good, and make best of a bad bargain. I've tried to make myself believe that I wasn't doing what I did with any thought of . . . of her; and that it was just a bit o' harmless fancy and encouragement, me thinking of her way I did; and that I knew I wasn't worthy of her, and nothing could come of it . . . nor ever would. But it seems"—his voice became un-

steady once again—" . . . it seems I've been mistook, sir. I see it now. I've let myself make believe and make believe while it's fair got master o' me, and I've come to believe it all at last. And now when it's all done with, there seems nothing else left me to believe, or that I feel I care a deal about believing.

" . . . I doubt I can't put it any clearer than that, sir," he added humbly.

XXV

THE young gentleman, touched and troubled at a sorrow before whose magnitude his inexperience failed, said commiserately, "I know . . . I know. . . ." He assured Fondie once more of his eternal friendship and sympathy, and with the remembrance of having seen this particular recommendation in books of the sort that Blanche had lent him, and the sort he had been under the necessity to secrete hurriedly beneath his waistcoat on occasions, bade Fondie to try and forget.

It was a sound and sane prescription, as Fondie's sigh seemed diffidently to acknowledge, but his shaking head confessed an inclination at fault.

"I wish I only could, sir," he said. "At least . . ." he scrupulously corrected himself, "I wish only I could wish to, sir. But I can't. That's the trouble of it. I can't put her out of my mind, nor I can't bring myself to want to put her out of my mind. She's been in all day. She's been in since last night. She's there now."

The young gentleman, impressed by the vividness of this final declaration, took a quick glance at Fondie's face and then away in the direction of Fondie's look, as though the sight that Fondie claimed to see had been embodied and were perceptible to other properly directed eyes besides his own.

"You'll maybe say it's foolish of me, sir," Fondie admitted.

"I know my sister thinks so. She hasn't said so yet, but she will. She's looked it a time or two already, as much as to say: 'You see how little she thinks about *you*! Where's sense of your thinking about *her*? Think about them that thinks about you. Be a man and show a bit o' pride.' I don't say she isn't right. Pride's what I lack, I know; but pride with me is like wine wi' some folk, sir. A little on it gets into my head. Sharp, it does. Less I give way to pride, and better.

". . . Besides"—he knew he had the encouragement of this approving friend's silence, and went on no less confidently than if the young gentleman had invited him by word—" . . . how can I put her out o' my mind now? I couldn't, sir. It would seem like thrusting a body out o' doors just when she needs all help and kindness one can give her. Not that I can give her a deal, sir, I know, fixed as I am. And not that she'd want a deal, I doubt, from such as me. But after thinking of her i' way I have done all these years, I can't think of her i' any other way just because trouble's befallen her; and not to think of her at all is no better than ingratitude, sir. I've been proud enough of her company when she was good enough to give it me, and nothing that's happened can alter that. A kindness is a kindness, whatever may come after. She was i' workshop not above a week ago. Sat on bench again where you are, sir."

"Here?" The young gentleman indicated a spot interrogatively with his finger.

"Why . . . maybe a bit more to yon way, sir," Fondie told him, filled with the conscientious spirit of precision in such a sacred matter. "Just about where yon tin of axle-grease is. She sat there biggest part of an hour, sir. Talking most o' time. I little thought then . . ." They both relapsed into silence, gazing at the tin of axle-grease that, not above a week ago, had been the Vicar's daughter.

"What will happen to her?" the young gentleman inquired in a voice almost of awe.

"It's bad to tell, sir," Fondie answered, pulling himself from

lethargy with an effort. "Very likely nothing. That's what happens in a deal o' such cases. And nothing's as bad to bide, at times, as anything I know, sir. But she'll have to bide it, best way she can. They say . . . she's took it very bad to heart. . . ."

"What do they generally do? People in trouble, I mean—like her."

"I don't know that there's any particular rule for it, sir," Fondie decided. "Mayhap there ought to be. Mayhap there will be in time. Sometimes they get wed."

"Couldn't Blanche?"

"She could, sir."

The young gentleman drew enlightenment from Fondie's doubting countenance rather than from his words.

"You mean, you think she won't. Of course. I was forgetting. She'd have to marry him. And he couldn't marry anybody who's got into trouble, could he? He couldn't marry her after she's disgraced herself."

"Not a gentleman like him, sir," Fondie concurred. "Humble folk might, but it's different with them. It doesn't matter a deal what humble folk does. Nobody takes any notice o' them. They can please themselves, as you may say, sir, and do what's right, without considering anybody. Nothing depends on 'em. But a gentleman has other duties to think on. He'll have yon Hall to think on, for one thing, I expect, sir."

The young gentleman interposed protestingly under his breath: "But it isn't his. It doesn't belong to him. He has no right to it. It's mine, Fondie."

The reminder came so unexpectedly as to deprive Fondie Bassiemoor for a moment of the powers of reply. It was true. He had overlooked the rightful ownership of Mersham; to such extent does custom reconcile us even to injustice.

"To be sure. It isn't his, sir," he said apologetically when speech returned. "It's yours. I beg your pardon. Nobody should know that better than me. It doesn't belong him: it

belongs you. But even if you were to take it away from him," he paused to consider sadly, ". . . I doubt if it would make a deal o' difference. He wouldn't marry her."

"Why not?"

"I doubt he wouldn't, sir. I think he never meant marrying her. She was just a pastime wi' him. Nothing no more. I doubt if he's even written to her since he's been away."

The young gentleman broke out indignantly, "The cad!" Instances of such perfidy and betrayal recurred to his mind. He remembered conduct of this base sort in the *Sunday Sacred*s that Blanche had lent him. Couldn't Fondie, for instance, give the offender a sound thrashing? That would be all right, wouldn't it? That would be a revenge after Blanche's heart. And Fondie was the man to do it. There was nobody anywhere who could do it better; of that the young gentleman was assured. If it hadn't been for the aged third person singular, he would have helped Fondie with pleasure; but Fondie knew how he was fixed.

His enthusiasm for this poetic retribution waned a little at the sight of Fondie's dubious face.

"In books, sir," Fondie decided, "it might do well enough. I'm not saying it wouldn't. I've heard tell of it being done an' all. But that was by young woman's brother, and I don't seem to remember that a deal of good came of it." On the whole, he said (with due respect to the young gentleman's proposal), it was not a course his judgment favored. "I've struck one man today, sir," he declared; "and I should be loath to strike another. They'd ask what business it was o' mine, and I doubt I should be hard set on to tell 'em, sir. Folk might say I was jealous it was him that had gotten her into trouble, i'stead o' me, and that I should 'a done same if I'd had same chance. . . ." A slight spasm seemed to ruffle the composure of his face, as when a sudden wind blows across still water. ". . . I'm not going to deny it, sir. I have my feelings. I know *them*, and how bad they are to bide at times.

I don't know his, that may be twice as bad to bide for anything I can tell. And if I haven't had his opportunities, how am I like to know what use I should have made of 'em? Opportunity tries us all, sir; we can't tell what we're made on without that. An' I always try and think what Book tells us: 'Judge not, that ye be not judged'—though there's moments when I think ower late. It's not for one man to judge another, let alone punish him."

To these sentiments the young gentleman listened with a most reverent and attentive silence, as if they had been inspired passages from Holy Writ. Their justice seemed incontestable, but it was the transcendent sort of justice to which his own humanity could only bow, without the hope of ever attaining. He confessed that Fondie's goodness was incomprehensible. "I don't know how you do it, Fondie. I couldn't. I can't. I don't suppose I should if I lived to be a hundred." And while Fondie disclaimed all title to this imputed goodness and assessed his demerits according to a much more human and imperfect standard, the young gentleman's thoughts—suffused as they were with admiration of and allegiance to his friend—hovered perplexedly about the vague, unformulated question: Was the goodness of the wheelwright's son too scriptural for earthly usage? Could his very virtues be the secret of his unsuccess with Blanche? Had he failed, indeed, because of the deficiency of those faults that prove men peccable and human; without which they lose the attachment that mankind feels towards fellows imbued with its own frailties: frailties that testify to a common kinship, and form a bridge for sympathies? But no. It could not be. Fondie was human. Fondie was magnificently human; strong, brave, generous, and faithful. Fondie had but this very afternoon given glorious pledge of how wonderfully human he was. The thought reassured him.

"Was he as big as you, Fondie?" he suddenly demanded.

"Was who as big, sir?" the wheelwright's son inquired with

some surprise, for his discourse and the young gentleman's thoughts had parted a while since at the cross-roads.

"The man you knocked down."

"He stood bigger, sir. That's only consolation I have. If he'd been same size, or smaller, I don't like to think what I might be feeling now." Nevertheless it was (he confessed) a poor consolation for any man to lean on for support, and he put no stress on it; and the young gentleman wondered again.

But if he wondered, the scepticism pertained solely to the spiritual parts of him, and involved the loyalty of his friendship not at all. Fondie was his friend; his best friend. And more than ever did he feel the pulse of friendship thrill within him when, at the moment of departure, he took Fondie's hand again in his, and Fondie thanked him in the Fondian voice of absolute sincerity and gratitude for his coming there that night.

"It's done me more good than I can say, sir," Fondie told him. "Thinking things over doesn't give relief; it only seems to make 'em worse to bide. All last night and all today I've been thinking . . . and yet if you'd asked me when you came in what I'd been thinking, or what settlement I'd come to, I couldn't ha' said for certain, sir. Thoughts, when you can't confide 'em and there's nobody you can tell them to, seem to fester inside. You can't think thoughts away; you've got to speak 'em to somebody that knows you and understands you, sir. After awhile there's so many of them you feel as if your head wasn't big enough to hold 'em all. . . ." He thanked his visitor fervently again. "I think I shall sleep sounder to-night, sir, and maybe I shall see things better and more resigned in the morning."

"And you won't give up, Fondie?" his friend exhorted. "You'll go on. You'll stick at it? . . . Of course, not for her. You can't do that, I know. That's over. But for me. For my sake. . . . And because—why, because you never know what may come of it. Some day . . . somebody else . . ."

It was left delicately at that. He gripped Fondie's hand

with encouraging suggestiveness, and Fondie gripped his hand in return with the tempered gratitude that, in this particular respect at least, had no illusions and no hopes; saying: "I'll see, sir. I don't deserve you should take trouble over me you have done. Least I can do is to say I'll try my best. I can't say more. I dursn't promise, for promises are easier made than kept. I shouldn't like to trust myself to a promise made i' state I'm in. . . .

" . . . Don't trouble with door, sir. I shall be following you as soon as I've blown lamp out. There's nothing much more to keep me in workshop. Does old gentleman haud up well? I'm thankful he does. Good night again, and thank you, sir."

XXVI

AND now, even upon the least of the participants in this tragic history some influence, less or greater, of the thing that had befallen, fell; transforming the features of once familiar life, and imposing the necessity of a new adjustment of the individual towards it and a fresh compromise of self with fact. All life is made up of such compromises, conscious or unconscious, and the essence of trouble consists in this: that it destroys the compromise to which we are accustomed, and on which (as we believe) our very peace and happiness depend, and leaves us without shelter or protection against the stern new facts for which the old self in its old improvident security made no provision.

In the shadowy seclusion of the aud hoose the young gentleman readjusted his views by the standard of the new knowledge, and sought to bring this and the thing that had befallen, and his own life, into a tranquil conformity. On his pillow, and at work before the bench or in the wheelwright's yard, Fondie Bassiemoor strove not less earnestly to find the necessary attitude of being that should conciliate this hard, tyrannic fact

and win back for him some measure, at least, of the peace that he had lost. With his habitual modesty he did not ask for it all, only a penitential portion of it; a mere modicum, sufficient to enable him to discharge his earthly duties and show a cheerful spirit in the home. And if, indeed, it had been possible for him to ease the Vicar's daughter of her dread burden and sustain the whole weight of her sorrow on his own shoulders, he would have asked no greater favor of Heaven. But Providence countenances no such heroic procedure, knowing full well that if it did man's sublime self-sacrifice would put its wrath to shame, and bring the whole system of divine chastisement to naught. And the Vicar, by the use of prayer and his pocket-handkerchief, strove like the young gentleman and Fondie Bassiemoor to find a new spirit to assimilate the new circumstance, which should sustain his broken dignity and spare his feelings in the parish. To this last delinquency of his daughter his lips made no allusion, though the parish waited anxiously for the least word that should justify dilation on the subject, but all he did was to speak with a sorrowing and significant voice of Trouble, as though Trouble were now an intimate member of the family, whose health gave cause for the deepest concern. Even the parishioners, to some extent, came under the influence of this trouble of which they themselves formed part, and were under the necessity to form fresh compromises, saying: "It was awkward when a body met Vicar nowadays. A body scarce knew what to say."

The attitude of Blanche's elder brother was expressed in a haughtier and less conciliatory demeanor towards Whivvle, as if he sought to sever himself from all dependence on its comment or opinion. He wore his hat at an angle suggesting contemptuous superiority to surroundings, and bestowed no more attention on his father's parishioners than he could help. As for the Bullocky, such subtleties of conduct being beyond him, he elected to make the best of a bad bargain by ungarlish candor, asking his colleagues if they had heard about

"our lass," and volunteering, without reserve, such information on the topic as lay in his power to contribute. And as for Blanche . . .

As for Blanche, not by one adjustment alone could she escape the awful consequences of her conduct, and adapt her life to take up and sustain this weight of fact imposed upon it. A hundred adjustments were necessary; adjustments from day to day, from hour to hour, from minute to minute, from mood to mood. Always, within herself, she was a self escaping from a self; a self that fled from a self that followed; a self that reasoned with a self that wept; a self shackled to a self in fetters and seeking desperately to be free.

And first, having wept until she could weep no more and exhausted every terror that the ingenuity of Trouble could devise, so that her soul seemed destitute of fear as her eye of tears, she appealed to the old Blanche in her to come forth from her miserable coward's hiding-place, and the old Blanche came forth, brave with the courage of exhaustion, like the appetite too sick for hunger. And she asked the old Blanche if the old Blanche was frightened of them—by whom she personified Whivvle—and the old Blanche responded, "No." And she said to the old Blanche: "Don't let them think you care for them. Show them you aren't frightened of them, if they think you are." And to give the old Blanche confidence she said: "Besides . . . they don't know. Nobody knows. Nobody's been told yet—only the carrier's wife; and she's promised. It's a secret. So what's there to be frightened of? Go out and let people see you don't care for them, and aren't frightened what anybody thinks. It's no business of theirs."

The old Blanche suggested with a white face: "Supposing anybody stops me! What if anybody asks?"

She answered: "They won't ask you. And if they do, you can say, 'What's it got to do with them?' If you don't go out soon, people will get started to talk, and think it's true, and say you dursn't."

And the old Blanche, stung by this insinuation, said: "I'll go. I'll go on bicycle. Then they'll see I aren't frightened and don't care for them."

And the old Blanche went, though it took her an eternity to get ready; and she peered from all the vicarage windows in turn, to make quite sure the moment was propitious for departure; and to let folk see how little frightened she was, she rode as far as Mersham Park and back and all through the main street, ringing her bell at the corner, past Fondie Bassiemoor's signboard, and home again at a high speed, with shameless color in her cheeks and her white teeth flauntingly displayed; and Whivvle gave a belated gasp at sight of her, for she rode very swiftly, and Whivvle could scarce believe. Whivvle, pronouncing judgment on her effrontery, said: "Took it very bad to heart, indeed! My wod! It didn't look like taking anything to heart. Trouble's wasted on her, one mud think. There's no learning syke lasses a lesson. No; nor two lessons won't teach 'em. Flittering about road, just as though nothing had happened. One wondered her father would let her. A body would 'a thought she'd ha' tried to look a bit sober for her credit's sake. Lawks-a-mussy! She might think she'd done something to be proud on."

And as for the shameless object of their condemnation, she flung aside the bicycle that Fondie Bassiemoor had given her—flung it aside in the shed at home as if she hated it and would never be friends with it again; and bit her lip till all her teeth were printed in it, in a paroxysm of shame and revolted pride; and wept the bitter tears with which this bitter ride had plenished her. For her eyes and ears were filled with the unbearable evidences of her published guilt, culled by her misguided courage: of scornful looks, or looks averted; of a strange and unfamiliar Whivvle instinct with the spirit of contempt; a Whivvle that turned upon her a hard, unwelcoming, unfriendly, and exultant face.

She had but one hope now; one lorn, despairing, and per-

sistent hope that clung to Mersham, as the starved and homeless hound haunts the very threshold of a persecutor, seeking succor even from the hand that threatens it. Her letter had miscarried. It had not reached him. He had not understood it. Trouble had been too diffident to make its meaning clear. Trouble had not emphasized itself enough. Trouble should have written to him in ink; not in pencil. But now the Rector was writing all would be well. He could not fail to write back to the Rector. He could not say to the Rector it was not true. It was true. He knew it was true. He knew; he knew. He knew he was the first . . . the very first. He knew there was nobody else. And he could not desert her now. . . . He would do something. Something would be done to take this heavy sorrow from her. It was only fair. She could not be left by him like this to people's scorn—just because she had done what he asked her.

Day by day she listened for the postman's coming with her very soul in her ears; manufacturing his footsteps out of minutest sound, fearful and expectant. Day by day she heard her brother and her father discuss the situation and herself, in which (as befitting one disgraced) she had no further share. Day by day, succeeding the slam of the front door that announced her brother's return, she heard his stereotyped inquiry. "Well?" and her father's mumbled answer to it, and the expostulatory comment that ensued. "Look here! What's being done? It isn't good enough. Something'll have to be done. We can't go on being kidded about like this. How was it left? Is he going to write to you, or have you got to write to him?" And invariably the Vicar's vague and dubious replies provoked her brother's anger, only too ready to be roused. "You haven't half let him have it. You should have told him straight. I told you to. I thought you were going to. Why didn't you?" To which her father's feeble equivocation would reply: "I did the best I could. It was a terrible thing for any father to undertake. You don't seem to realize. . . . One imprudent

word and all my labor would have been in vain. I had to be most careful not to offend him. Before long we shall need all the few remaining friends we have. Had my counsel only been followed sooner . . . had only my family respected the advice their father gave them!" "Family?" his son protested. "What have *I* to do with them? Don't mix me up with her. I've spoken to her a jolly sight straighter than you ever did. I've told her to shut up till I'm sick of it, but she's said she didn't care, and she wasn't frightened of me, and I wasn't her father. She cheeked me as she liked, and you let her. You never backed me up. I told you she was getting too thick, long ago, but you wouldn't take it in. She's just done as she's liked. If I told her I should tell you, all she's said was: 'Tell him. I aren't frightened of him. He daren't say anything to me. You dursn't.'" And when the Vicar, betraying the ravages of trouble in the weakness with which he submitted to his son's reproaches, alluded feebly to "example," his son demanded: "What's my example got to do with her? I aren't a girl. If she'd only done what she ought to have done, she'd have had no time to bother her head with *me*. Other fellows, that haven't got sisters, don't set examples, and why should *I*, just because of *her*?"

So, for a whole week—which means a week and more—her destiny hung trembling in the balance; and her brother said, "Well? . . ." and her father answered, "No. . . . Nothing!" and her starveling hope clung piteously to the rectory gate at Mersham, dying for food, and yet through shame and fear devoid of any voice to beg. And at the expiration of that time, when hope had almost begun to find sustenance in silence, and to believe that something was being done and help was close at hand—hope died, a very violent and dismal death.

No letter came. The Rector did not write, for writing has (as every rector knows) a dozen disadvantages. Nor did the Rector call, for calling (in such circumstances) has as many, and he had no intention to be involved in any domestic episode,

or to be invited to view the tears and unrestrained prostrations of misguided girlhood. He had contrived to know as little as possible of the Vicar's daughter during all these years, and had succeeded, with the greatest facility, in forgetting her after each rare accidental meeting; and this was certainly no time to remake an acquaintance that his rectorial care had kept so long, successfully, unmade. Nor did he send by word of mouth to ask the Vicar to be so good as to call upon him some afternoon in passing—which, under ordinary circumstances, would have had for Blanche's father the peremptoriness of a command, and sent him off to Mersham in the vicarage buggy the moment dinner was over—for the Rector did not wish his servants to comment upon the singularity of the fact of Mr. Bellwood's having paid two visits to the Rectory within the short space of ten days. It might give a false impression. But he contrived, by a process known best to himself, to ride the Vicar down on the uninhabited outskirts of his parish, between Baulk Farm and the old whitewashed Whivvle toll-cottage. He overtook the Vicar's bowed shoulders laboring homeward, and looked from his saddled eminence upon the Vicar's greasy collar and shabby hat with an eye apparently so remote from any thought or expectation of the kind that not until he had ridden by did it awake to consciousness of a something familiar in the stooping and pedestrian figure. He threw up his riding crop with a spasmodic and interjectional "Ah!" and reined in his horse, half turning in his saddle with one hand upon its croup. "That you, Bellwood? . . . I thought I couldn't be mistaken." He spoke of the weather; of the roads; of the state of the land; of the hunting—of which he had had one day last week—in brief, crisp sentences, like dog biscuits, that he broke up and threw down to the listener by his stirrup, with the condescension that imparts opinions but does not ask them; whilst the Vicar, agreeing effusively to all he said, and troubled at heart as to what, in his daughter's best interests, this providential encounter demanded of him, made ready to clear his throat at the

first propitious opportunity. Then the Rector touched up his horse—to the consternation of the Vicar, asking himself what possible account of the meeting he could make acceptable to his son—and seemed as good as gone already, when suddenly he drew his horse up again as though with thought of some forgotten thing, and said: “By the way, Bellwood. . . .” This time he did not turn quite round upon his saddle, but waited until the Vicar had made good the space between them, and stood by his stirrup once more. “. . . Referring to that matter about which you called to see me . . .”

The Vicar, vastly relieved for his son’s sake, and welcoming even this mere allusion with the effusiveness of gratitude, said: “Thank you . . . thank you. It was on my mind . . . but I hesitated to call you back, not knowing what engagement you might have.”

“I wrote, as I told you I would,” the Rector informed him.

The Vicar, with his heart in his mouth, murmured he was sure of it. “I never for a moment doubted . . .”

“. . . In fact, some correspondence has recently passed between us on the subject. I had a letter from Leonard D’Alroy the other day. He writes like a gentleman, as I expected. No one could ask for a more open, straightforward, honorable letter. Not the least shirking or evasion. After such a letter it is impossible for any sane, impartial person to doubt for one moment. Thank goodness, it clears him! I’ll admit now to you it’s taken a load off my mind. The whole business has cost me more trouble and anxiety than I care to confess. I am only sorry for you, Bellwood. . . .”

Out of a haze of palpitating hopes and apprehensions that subsided into gray despair, the Vicar’s voice emerged, faltering and incredulous:

“. . . He *denies* it?”

“Denies it?” The Rector’s voice was almost indignant in its tone of repudiation. “Ah! I see what you mean.” The voice became more placatory. “In that sense, certainly not.

He does *not* deny it. I told you he would deny nothing that was the truth. I'll confess it's made me terribly anxious. I've been as nervous as a kitten these last few days, until I got his letter. It's too big a burden, Bellwood, to place on the shoulders of a mere boy. I know by myself what he must have passed through. He'd be asking himself what he ought to say and do—not for his own sake; Leonard wouldn't consider that; but for the sake of his father, and Mersham, and all his friends. Poor chap, poor chap! I'll wager it has given him a terrible time. But, thank goodness, that's all over now! I'll admit I'm sorry he couldn't have denied the whole thing, but Leonard D'Alroy is not that sort of fellow; that sort of subterfuge isn't in the D'Alroy blood. He admits, with a courage that might well serve as a lesson in truth and duty to the lower orders to-day, that he *did* by some means make your daughter's acquaintance at the Flower Show. He does not explain how, nor would I insult him by asking. Their meeting on this occasion can only have been of the briefest. A minute or two; certainly not more. And he admits, with praiseworthy reluctance to say anything calculated to reflect on your daughter, that as a result of this chance acquaintanceship they did see one another subsequently. For this thoughtless—and quite innocent—conduct on his part he expresses his sincere regret, and I gather (though the fine fellow is far too true a gentleman to say so) that it was forced upon him more by your daughter's insistence than by his own inclinations. I remember now, in fact, that she was at one time almost a weekly attendant at the Mersham morning service. But it never occurred to me . . . I never for a moment associated the two ideas. I put the thing down to a natural interest in the D'Alroys and Mersham. Lots of people came for the same reason.

“ . . . But as for this other business, Bellwood, I'm thankful to say his conduct is in marked contrast to your daughter's. He treats her with the most scrupulous respect; too much, I've even been disposed to think. He lays no charge against

her. He imputes nothing against *her* character. In fact, he judges her absolutely by himself and his own blameless feelings, and does her the credit of saying that no act of the least impropriety took place between them. His frankness makes me reproach myself that I ever for an instant doubted him, and I have already written to tell him so, and assure him that he has gone up in my estimation, and that his father has reason to be proud of him. He may have acted foolishly and indiscreetly to a certain extent—who, in his position, hasn't? Indeed, to that extent he takes the blame upon himself and speaks in terms of real sorrow for the boyish deception practiced on me. But as for the other matter . . . I can see that the mere suggestion of it, delicately though you may be sure I made it, has roused him. He stands on his mettle there. He says—what I myself pointed out as tactfully as possible at our interview—that he formed but one of your daughter's apparently very numerous acquaintances, and that it is to these, rather than to him, you ought to turn."

His words rode down the Vicar's faltering words, as his horse outwore the Vicar's shambling legs. Beneath them, and sometimes stemming their current by an expostulatory monosyllable or two, like stones beneath a running brook, the Vicar's voice at intervals was to be heard. "My daughter? . . ." "Terrible!" "Cruel accusation. . . ." "Monstrous. . . ." "Do you suggest . . ." But his nature was too stunned for wrath; expostulation served him no more adequately than his feet.

"Well. . . ." The Rector gathered his bridle and took interest in the distant landscape once again—the perspective of low hedgerows that lost itself in the dark woodland fringe betokening Mersham, where all the tragedy of Blanche Bellwood's ruined life seemed to be written, black and soulless, against the faded orange of the setting sun. ". . . There's nothing more to be done that I can see. As I've said before, I'm sorry, Bellwood; very sorry for you. If I were not so sorry I might be tempted to say more. I've always held you in esteem. But you

mustn't blame me. I'm as innocent as this horse . . ." and he slapped his left hand resoundingly upon the animal's glossy neck. His eye described a distant car approaching on the road, and the bridle in his right hand tightened, for he had no wish to be observed in close and protracted conversation with the father of public Trouble, lest a false deduction might be drawn from it. "Well. . . ." That was his leavetaking. He did not add "Good day" or any other conventional last word, but touched his horse into action and rocked away upon the grassy margin of the road. "Come then! Come, pet! Steady, mare. . . . Come, my beauty."

Behind him, on the roadside where once his stirrured leg had been, the Vicar of Whivvle stood, disconsolate and motionless as a mawkin [scarecrow] in the spring corn, gazing after the receding horseman with red and watery eyes, as though a cruel wind had stung them and made them blind even to God. After this, all was over. His daughter had dishonored his gray hairs. He would never be invited to conduct divine week-night service at Mersham any more. Not until the lumbering cart came up, with Dod's brother Barnard in it, did he throw off the lethargy that lay like a sack upon his shoulders, and pick his way back to the narrow footpath and resume his interrupted homeward walk. Homeward? No, not homeward. "He had no home," the moving lips with bitterness protested. No home henceforth save that last long narrow home—to which his every footstep led him—where his dear wife, mercifully spared this trouble that would have killed her, kept wait for him already beneath the churchyard sod.

XXVII

THUS was the last hope slain, as all Whivvle knew by nightfall; for Dod's brother Barnard had been witness of the momentous colloquy upon the road, and had seen the Vicar of Whivvle left standing like a signpost, pointing the way to Nowhere; and his eyes (when he drove up to him) were red; and he moved into the pathway like one asleep, talking to his beard, and paid no heed to cart or driver as they went by. And that night, too, the altercation between the Vicar and his son, induced by the customary "Well?" that Blanche's brother asked with the papery cigarette upon his lip, was more acute than it had been since the first vehement inquest over Blanche's bed. From the refuge of silence Blanche was dragged forth without mercy to undergo once more the pangs of cross-examination, and be made contrite and rebellious by turns beneath her brother's bullying questions. Look here, now, Blanche! They wanted no kid. Was young D'Alroy the liar, or was it her? Which was it? It was him. Good. Her brother held no brief for his sister's veracity, and flatly said so, but her asserverations compelled his grudging acceptance of her word, and in his noisy altercation with his father this point, at least, was taken as the basis of the situation. The front door boomed out like a minute-gun when, unconvinced at last, and unconvincing, he took impatient leave to tell Mi Foster what a fool the guv'nor was, and how he let himself be kidded about by anybody, and if he'd only been him this afternoon he would have had a good mind to give the Rector one under the ear. And the Vicar, feebly defending himself against his son's aspersions, had complained indignantly of his son's unreasonable injustice, demanding: What could he, the Vicar, do? What could he, the Vicar, say? He was in a most delicate and horrible situation. He had his office to consider; his dignity as the head of this important parish to think

of—for his family's sake no less than his own. Make them sit up? Yes; it was easy to say, "Make them sit up; show them; let them have it." But how was he to make them sit up, and show them and let them have it, without bringing the very roof that sheltered them about their ears? Lawyers' hands? Take the matter into court? Publish to the world his daughter's disgrace? Let everybody know what had happened? Did his son actually mean *that*? He shrank, horrified, from the mere suggestion. His son did not know what he was talking about. Lawyers' hands? Lawyers' hands meant money. Where was the money coming from? What was his paltry stipend against the social influence of Mersham? Once let him get across with the Rector of Mersham, and the Rector's friends, and his status in this diocese was gone. He feared it was gone already; but not all—not all. If this became a public scandal his position would be made intolerable. Think of the rural dean . . . the archdeacon. . . . Did they want this awful business bringing right to the Bishop's ears?

. . . No, no. He saw no escape from it. They were at their mercy. They must bow. They must submit. It was God's judgment on their dreadful ways of life and disregard of His Commandments. It was God's heavy punishment for his children's disobedience to their father's will. All that lay within their Christian power now was to try and hush the matter up; to live respectable, godly, well-ordered lives, and so give enmity no chance against them. Let them pray for strength to bear it, and fortitude to live it down. . . .

And in that same hour in which her hope was slain; in that same instant; in the twinkling of an eye, as though the dread last trump of the fifty-first verse of the fifteenth chapter of the First Epistle of Paul, the Apostle to the Corinthians, had sounded, Blanche changed, and all her world with her. The world she lived in henceforth was the illimitable world of her own sorrow.

From that day forth she faded from the sight of Whivvle,

like some once vivid sunbeam from the western sky. Her place in church—that a restless and expectant congregation kept under curious scrutiny each Sabbath day—remained unfilled; the pew (whose name was legion) that had once seemed not too spacious for her radiant being, yawned void and narrow, like an unsealed grave. The Vicar, challenging her absence after the first occasion, on his return from church, and asking why she had not been, was met with the unanswerable question, “. . . How could I?” in a voice of burning shame.

How could she? To be sure. He had forgotten. He had never thought. It was true. Such attendance on his daughter's part could never count as worship; could never aspire to be dignified into the loftiness of example. Other daughters, similarly situated, had worshipped there; but not his own. Her very name, even, as though sharing in the offense of her person, and bearing the disgrace her body had brought upon it, dropped out of existence from the Vicar's speech or hearing. Parochially he never spoke of Blanche, and none but the witless or the ignorant or the malign ever asked him how his daughter did. All that discretion allowed itself was to express the hope that things were going on well at home, to which the Vicar, if he did not quietly bow his head, answered with a vaguely fervent “Thank you. . . . Thank you . . .” as if the question were a tribute of esteem, calling for gratitude rather than an answer. All other phases of domestic trouble he had committed feebly to the confidence of the parish, but not this. This was something his lips could not utter, that sealed them as the rock seals the sepulcher. Everything pertaining to domestic life was swallowed up in silence; an earthquake might have engulfed the vicarage for all the reference he made to it. When he spoke of “home,” he implied Heaven. The nearest he ever came to speaking of his daughter was by means of a sigh; or the sorrow that had befallen him, by a use of his handkerchief. And though Whivvle respected the sanctity of a father's feel-

ings, and copied with respectful fidelity the expression of the Vicar's face and the melancholy of the Vicar's voice and the sympathetic tiredness of the Vicar's manner in speaking with him, Whivvle chafed at heart beneath the rigor of its exclusion from colloquial participation in the Vicar's grief.

"Diz Vicar think we don't know?" Whivvle demanded, when the Vicar had been and sighed and gone away again without any word that Whivvle wished to hear on any topic nearer to its heart than Heaven, or its own state of health and soul. "My wod! Vicar mun think we're fond."

"He can ask after *oor* daughters," Whivvle protested. "He can an' all. As if *oors* was the only ones that wanted asking after. What about his? She can do wi' as much asking after as them—an' more."

And Whivvle followed curiously in the footsteps of the Vicar from house to house, to ask what the Vicar had said when he called, and if the Vicar had named it yet, and the answer was invariably in the negative, or so vexatiously near as to be indistinguishable; and Whivvle said: Why, no! Whivvle never thought he would 'a done"; and Whivvle deprecated such close, deceptive ways. "Vicar reckons to call himself a Christian," said Whivvle. "If that's all he can do to prove it it's a pity. Comes and shares in all our bits o' trouble, he does, when we have any, and nobody begrudges him. But when trouble comes *his* way, does he think to share it? Not him. If we'd had to depend on him for all we've been telt, we should 'a got to know a lot by nool! My wod, we should!

"It makes one feel," said Whivvle, "as if one didn't want to tell *him* nothing. Lawks, I've been as near telling him so, at times, as a toucher. If he'd only name it, an' done with, it would be something. Anybody can see fair enough it's on his mind all time."

But the Vicar never named it. He only sighed, and blew it; and carried it perpetually on his bowed shoulders, like a peddler stooping beneath his pack. And little by little this spirit of

disconsolate reticence infected the Vicar's home behind whose secretive walls Blanche Bellwood lived and moved.

Whivvle saw her not, but from behind the shelter of the stagnant curtains she still saw Whivvle, inconceivably remote and distant, like some faint star. She heard the far-off puff and whistle of the trains—those trains that had once upon a time been her daily friends and comrades, bearing her riotously to Hunmouth in the first flush of her exuberant girlhood. She heard the bark of once familiar dogs, each one well known to her by voice and name. She heard the daily drone of the threshing engine, and knew by its altered intonation in whose stackyard it stood. She heard the commotion of horses, and the so-called music of the hounds when the hunt invaded Whivvle—sounds from the unreal world she had once visioned in her brief, transitory dream.

At first, constituting the four walls of her father's house her cloister, she had immured herself with the bitterness of a sorrow that renounces all; darkening her heart, and making her soul a cell for cramped wretchedness to occupy. She sought not penitence, but self-revenge; willful suffering, not contrition.

And then, because human nature is what it is, and stronger than the human will, outwearing with equal impartiality its good resolutions and its bad, her ears began again to hearken and her eyes to see, and her heart to take heed of the features of this circumscribed world in which misfortune flung her. The bosom has more hopes than one; life more interests. Whivvle might be closed to her, but here was a whole house; here were beds to make and rooms to clean and a kitchen to cook in and meals to get ready. If life debarred her from its joys, it did not withhold from her its duties. Those much despised and long neglected subjects of her father's preaching had, it seemed, their use and solace after all, though it needed sorrow's eyes to see them. Out of the ruins of her old life could she not yet contrive to make a humbler and a happier? Little by little she began, very gradually first of all for fear they should remark

the sudden change in her and challenge her good intentions, and so lead her to deny and renounce them, and bring all this reformation to naught. She began in that frequent starting-place of such reformation and beginnings, her own bedroom, and did what all these years she had resolved and yet not done before. Hers was the first footfall heard upon the stairs after the Swiss alarm clock by her pillow had sounded. It cost the wounded débris of her pride more pangs than any knew to make her brother's breakfast wait each morning on his coming, and his tea punctiliously attendant on his return, but she did it; and so adaptable is human nature that after the first few days he accepted the innovation as if it had been the custom of a lifetime, and descried no novelty or merit in it. And gradually, in like manner, her disgraced and exiled spirit attached itself to the once detested house as to a fellow in adversity. Whilst Fondie Bassiemoor's bicycle rusted beneath its shed where she had flung it, the kitchen that the carrier's wife had viewed with such domestic consternation brightened like a smile; its grate and fender and polished fire-irons vied with any that the parish could have shown. She cooked with care and conscience—by scale and the clock; and put into most exemplary practice all that in her thoughtless but not unobservant hours of indolence she had seen done and laughed at for the doing in the carrier's kitchen. Each room in the house had its duly ordered day. The gazeless windows with the stagnant curtains draping them belied, at least, the reformed cleanliness of all beyond, and betrayed no inkling to the outer world of the new and active spirit at work within. Now and then, as though with the impulse to revive a fading memory, Blanche touched with her finger-tip the keys of the piano that had produced such discord in the old domestic life; but the note once faintly sounded, she replaced the lid with the apprehensive haste of one who fears to be heard.

As for her trouble, though it constituted all her world and all her acts and thoughts subsisted in it, it was as much a thing of

silence here, within her father's walls, as in the world beyond. For all the mention that her father made of it since the falling of that final blow, she might have never sinned or brought dishonor on his name. Like one stentorian and commanding voice that awes all other voices into silence, so this one great trouble had seemed to hush all other troubles into peace, and imbue the vicarage with an atmosphere of strange and almost sacred calm. Towards her father her heart developed a great gratitude. He never reproached, never upbraided her; never added fuel to the fires of remorse forever burning in her bosom, or treated her with that repudiative sternness she was conscious she deserved. On the contrary, his attitude towards her was one of diffident respect; not studied, but instinctive. It seemed as if this destructive blow had broken all those chafing intimacies that had constituted their relations in the past, and made them strangers now, dependent on those considerations and politenesses that strangers use. When her father spoke to her by name, it was in such a voice as he might have addressed to some parishioner's daughter; for the things she did for him he thanked her scrupulously. At times the very goodness of his treatment of her fed remorse and reawakened her fears, that questioned: Did he really understand? Or could it be he had incomprehended, or forgotten, and his questionless acceptance of her service was but the proof of a slumbering intelligence which would again need to be rudely roused?

His daughter knew—ah! was she likely for one moment to forget it?—that this peace within the house was all illusory; that it marked but the silence before the storm; that the thunders and lightnings it preceded and foretold must still inexorably be loosed, and the rains of Heaven's wrath beat down upon her head.

And so, striving to ward the future from her, and living each day as if it had no fellow, she sought absorption in her little world. Industry alone could lend captivity a purpose and save her. From morning until night her object was to be employed.

She cooked and set and cleared away the meals. She did not share them. Always she had had her meal before or meant to take it after, or was not hungry, when the time came. Save for some task demanding it she rarely sat down, and never in the living portion of the house or in her father's presence. Her life, even within these intimately circumscribing walls, found space to move and keep apart, immersed in its own duties and the ever-present sense of its unworthiness, that sought to keep its acts and thoughts and sorrows unobtrusive and unshared.

XXVIII

DAYS drew in; nights lengthened. Time, kept moving by a world of clock-weights, pendulums, and watch-springs, ticked inexorably onward. Christmas came and wreathed the pillars of the church with dismal evergreens; but no Blanche mounted to the pinnacle of reckless ladders, or said "Damn!" and sucked her fingers when the holly pricked them. It was a changed and sad and altered Christmas, with nobody to call Fondie Bassiemoor a silly fool or tell him he was sickening. Other Christians awoke, and awakened each other in mutual turn, and shook hands and said, "A Merry Christmas!"—but the one Christian worth waking in Fondie's Christmas world slept unawakened like the very tombs, neither wishing nor being wished. Whivle, grown impatient, for a sight of her, to the pitch of complaint, said: "Why! Surely she'll show hersen on syke a morning as this, and not let folk think they've offended her. It's not *oor* doing, hooiver. She'll have to show hersen some day. She can't live shut up i' yon spot all her life." And Whivle—the distaff side of Whivle, versed in the mysteries of its sex's heart—declared: "Why, no! She'll be as proud of it when it diz come as all rest. She'll want to show hersen then, at any rate, for bairn's sake, and hear folk praise it and say how fine it is."

But she disappointed their hopes. She disappointed even Fondie Bassiemoor's hopes, faint and hopeless though they were. Her place was empty. Not even her brothers went to church to celebrate Christ's birthday and sing "Peace on Earth, Good-will toward Men." Only the Vicar trudged to church and back again, with no more spring in his gait or joy in his shoulders or festivity in his eye than if the occasion had been a Quadragesimal Sunday and the dinner awaiting him roast beef instead of goose; shaking hands of resignation with parishioners, and disseminating watery good wishes for a reason to whose significance he seemed a total stranger. Whivvle, studying his progress and noting the employment of his feet, commented, "Aye! Aud man begins to show it. It's shook him a deal." And some said, "You may depend. He dizzn't blaw his nose wi' same strength he did."

From Mersham came news that the young Squire was not spending his Christmas at the rectory as expected, and that it was uncertain whether he would be able to pay any visit to the estate before the next term.

In January the carrier's daughter was married at last; sooner than her parents had anticipated. The Vicar performed the ceremony in his faded cassock and dingy surplice, and was moved to tears in the middle of it (he was always fond of the carrier's daughter, they say), and could not proceed until he had found his handkerchief. Afterwards he went to bid the bride Godspeed and God's blessing at the home of her parents, where the photographer from Merensea stood all prepared to take the portrait of the bride and bridegroom and bridal party in full regalia in front of the kitchen garden, just avoiding the water tub. The three Whivvle bells rang in honor of the bride for nearly twenty minutes, and the Vicar trudged homeward after many humid handshakes with a special large slice of wedding cake in his overcoat pocket that the carrier's wife had privately pressed on his acceptance. It got over a difficulty that had been discussed, and was—in its essence—a delicate and

thoughtful act; but even the most delicate and thoughtful acts can cause pain, and whether the blade of the knife be blunt or keen, its function is to cut.

This same month, too, though nearer the end of it, Fondie Bassiemoor sustained a great loss. It was a loss for which he had been to some extent prepared, but even the most anticipated troubles take preparation unaware. Ever since the day succeeding his conference with the young gentleman in the lamp-smoked workshop he had known that the occupants of the aud hoose were likely to take leave of Whivvle for some time in the new year. The young gentleman, almost as sorrowful as Fondie at the prospect that such a separation evoked, confided that this going might even be for good. The Third Person Singular (it seemed) was growing very restless; very fretful and difficult to please. He protested they were wasting time; they were letting the precious moments slip from under their feet. They were dreaming; they were dreaming. Since the Mersham Flower Show, and all those consequences it entailed, he had chafed continually against the isolation and restrictions of their home. Other people went to Oxford—people of the most wrongful pretension. It was time Lancelot went to Oxford too, to befit himself for his great part in life, and make himself worthy of his patrimony when it came. Not that Lancelot was consumed with any burning wish to go. All things considered, he very much preferred the friendly seclusion of the wheelwright's workshop, his soul's true Alma Mater, and the comforting companionship of the wheelwright's son, whose tranquilizing influence lulled life and offered, as it were, a sheltering haven against those mortal discontents and passions by which it was assailed.

To make the prospect of Oxford tolerable he had associated it with wild dreams on Fondie Bassiemoor's behalf—that were not, after all, to him much wilder or more distant than this Oxford-Mersham dream itself; figuring a Fondie Bassiemoor resplendent in cap and gown, who (their conjoint years of col-

lege ended) should come, on that most bright and glorious day to be, to take up duty as Mersham's Rector—the present Rector being comfortably and providentially disposed of for the purpose. And though Fondie Bassiemoor subscribed but a deprecatory and shrinking acquiescence to this vision splendid, protesting that such a place as Oxford was no place for such as him, sir, even supposing he had ability to get there—which he doubted; still, it was one of those make-believes which had laid hold of him, and he had lived under the spell of it for days at a time, and sat a rector in every sense but one at the meal-table in the kitchen at home.

And now this make-believe was burst in turn, like the other make-believes; like all the make-believes of life and life itself, the biggest make-believe of all. He did not mourn. His face betrayed no evidence of surprise or disappointment. He had expected it, sir. He had known it, sir—all along.

The young gentleman, disturbed in his own hopes by Fondie's serene submission thus to a destiny not yet fulfilled, made haste to divest it of finality. Nothing was settled. Perhaps he would not go. He hoped he would not go. And in the end, as it transpired, he did not go. They went instead, and for the present, to Hampshire—where there were some churches to explore and tombstones to seek, and brasses to rub and registers to read, and inscriptions to decipher and a host of sickening duties to be done. A doleful substitute for Whivvle and Fondie Bassiemoor, the workshop and the wheelwright's yard. They would be absent a month or more. He could not say how much more. That depended on Him. And meanwhile the Third Person Singular wished to see Fondie in person. It was about the house. Would Fondie keep the key and take charge of it during their absence? There was no one else his grandfather could trust. Gladly Fondie would. Why, to be sure, sir, Fondie would. Fondie would be only too proud to do anything the old gentleman wished, and try his best, sir, to justify the confidence reposed in him.

So Fondie presented himself respectfully at the aud hoose in his best cap to learn the old gentleman's will and pleasure, and the old gentleman expatiated at length and with minute particularity on the nature and importance of the charge. He showed Fondie the locks of all the rooms in turn, impressing on Fondie's understanding their precise significance and character; the way they turned, and the special aptitude required to turn them. He showed Fondie priceless pieces of old family porcelain that must on no account be touched or handled. He showed Fondie the irreplaceable pieces of old family silver that in their shroud of baize, and confined in a corded trunk, were to be interred beneath his own bed. He showed Fondie pieces of old family furniture; old family pictures; *secrétaires*, and a portly bureau packed with family documents and papers whose loss would precipitate the *dies iræ* and bring about the immediate destruction of the solar system. A fire would be necessary in this room from time to time, to keep these irreparable papers dry—but the utmost care was imperative—the utmost caution. One spark, one thoughtless match. . . . He left the consequences, unspecified and incalculable, to Fondie's own imagination and conscience, expressed by an uplifted and portentous forefinger. Did Bassiemoor understand? Eh, what? What did Bassiemoor say? Bassiemoor said he did? Bassiemoor did? Eh, what? . . . Well, then. . . . Well, then. Bassiemoor was to call again before they took their leave, to go over the house once more and make sure of what was expected of him. This, too, Bassiemoor did and many things besides. Bassiemoor helped the old gentleman and the young to pack for their departure. And Bassiemoor suggested innumerable wise provisions for the care and safety of the objects left behind, that won for him the old gentleman's approbative condescension. And Bassiemoor went to the station to inquire concerning trains, and brought back all the necessary details for the journey written in Bassiemoor's best hand. And Bassiemoor it was that arranged with Bob Machin and his horse, and suggested to Bob

Machin the advisability of giving that and his wagonette a rub-down the night before, and of beating the dust out of the cushions. And Bassiemoor presented himself at the aud hoose an hour before the wagonette was due, to take his last instructions and say he trusted now he understood 'em, sir; and this key turned to left, but he mustn't turn her over-hard; and that to right, but she needed a bit of a click i' middle; and yon key went in bottom side up, and he was to give her a sup of oil; and silver was under bed; and this was address, sir, written out on paper, and if anything happened he was to write or send a telegram without delay.

And the young gentleman, drawing Fondie Bassiemoor aside, seized hold of his hand and shook it fervently, saying he was sorry. He hoped it wouldn't be long. He should miss him frightfully. He would write. Fondie must write, too. Fondie must tell him everything. Fondie must go on. Fondie must stick at it. Fondie mustn't give up. Would Fondie promise? Did Fondie promise? And Fondie said, if the young gentleman wouldn't expect overmuch from any promise that Fondie made, nor took it overserious, then Fondie would promise. Yes, sir. Fondie would try his best.

Whereat the young gentleman wrung his hand again and said he knew Fondie would. Fondie was a brick. Thank him for it. That was all right. Thank him, Fondie. Thank him. Fondie was the only real friend he had in the whole world.

And though Fondie's modest friendship most piously disclaimed the name of friend, deeming the utmost that it could profess itself in such unequal circumstances was "well-wisher," the generous tribute brought a lump to his throat that was still there, like a cough solidified or the last sucking of humbug prematurely swallowed, when the old gentleman and the young, and Bob Machin and the ribby horse and superannuated wagonette were far upon their road towards the station, and Fondie Bassiemoor stood alone upon the doorstep with the

aud hoose key hung on his crooked forefinger and a feeling of emptiness and desolation in his stomach.

XXIX

FONDIE BASSIEMOOR took his new duties very seriously—more seriously, indeed, than seemed to meet the favor of the wheelwright or of the wheelwright's daughter, who retorted sharply, "Y'adn't need to ask!" to her father's querying as to Fondie's whereabouts. "He's at aud hoose. That's where he is. He's never anywheres else. Ye may know very well where he is whenever he's to seek."

First thing in a morning Fondie would visit the aud hoose, and go punctiliously through all its rooms from top to bottom, to make quite sure that everything within was safe and sound. On sunny days he opened out its shutters, and on wet days closed them. Regularly once a week he lit a fire in the priceless document room, which he fenced off from all likelihood of danger by a special contrivance of twofold wire netting, that cost him a night's labor in the workshop to devise and put together; so that he could feel at liberty to leave the fire untended without the least apprehension for the day of wrath and end of all things. Night and morning, too, he bore milk in a little pitcher (a most unmanly office that of itself proclaimed how very fond he was), and scraps of meat and sundries for the aud hoose cat that knew and waited for his footstep, and ran purring at the sound of it to rub its hairs upon his trousers leg. And always after he had had his tea he made the punctilious round of the aud hoose once again, to test its bolts and catches, its locks and chains and shutters, its windows and its doors, and satisfy himself that all was safe as human care could make it. Last thing at night, too, before betaking himself upstairs to bed in stockinged feet behind his outstretched candle, he paid a visit

to the aud deserted hoose and tried the padlock with his fingers and shook the gate, that Conscience might have no cause to sleep unsoundly or start up from its pillow with a sudden haunting fear of some charge unfulfilled.

But not alone for conscience' and for duty's sake he did these things. Even in the most disinterested human act some minute self-interest resides—that impalpable nucleus of the ego that is inherent in the noblest deed of selfless heroism. He visited the house for comfort and companionship. The sight of it recalled the cherished days that had been and brought back its occupants to mind, and in looking at its walls and windows he seemed to see more clearly the face of him who was his friend, and to whom his soul subscribed itself in all devotion and respect "well-wisher," and to hear more audibly the accents of the young gentleman's last injunctions: ". . . You'll stick to it. You won't give up. You'll go on?" and the young gentleman's fervent acknowledgment of his promise: ". . . That's right. That's all right. I knew you would. I felt sure!"

And within the measure of that modified and humbler promise, that promise bounded by stricter frontiers of reality, he kept his word. He did stick to it. He did go on—though at times it took all his fortitude to keep his elbows on the table and his ears in his hands and his head over the book and his eye upon the supercilious print that mocked them; and to go, at such despondent moments, and take a look at the sacred features of the aud hoose was very fortifying and strengthening to the soul.

Out of deference to the promise, and in pious memory of the well-wished, he practiced still the silent pedals of the organ in the dim-lit chancel of Blanche's father's church, and conducted the choir practice there each Friday evening, and stopped reverently over the manuals on Sunday. But Blanche he never saw. Since the afternoon she had come to sit on the bench in the wheelwright's shop whilst Fondie worked (where the tin of

axle-grease was situated at the time of the young gentleman's visit) he had seen no vestige of her. Only his sadness and his memory, and the tongues of Whivvle, assured him she had ever lived. But of her father he saw in these days curiously more. In place of Blanche's confident step and healthy swing it was the Vicar's shuffling foot that came into the wheelwright's yard, bringing Miss Bassiemoor's forehead to the scullery window-pane, and the Vicar's larger bulk that cast its shadow on the workshop shavings from the door, and the Vicar's voice that inquired of the dimness beyond if Fondie were there. His errands, when declared, were often of the slenderest. Sometimes, indeed, he had forgotten them, and would stay for awhile with his hand upon his temple, saying, "It will come back to me after a time. . . ." Perhaps it was a matter touching hymns. Did Fondie remember if they had had 225 last Sunday? Or was it the week before? Or it was a message that he wished conveyed to this one or the other, and would be deeply indebted if Fondie (whom, to mark the depth of his esteem, he not infrequently addressed as "friend," and even "dear friend" on occasions) would charge himself with its delivery should he by any chance be going in that direction. The contingent clause was one of courtesy alone, for no matter in what direction the Vicar's message lay, it was always the direction that Fondie would be going, and generally not later than "after he'd had his tea, sir, if that would suit him, and be soon enough." And the Vicar, grateful to the verge of humility, thanked the wheelwright's son with an unction that of itself should have sufficed to pass him into Heaven. From the day his daughter disappeared from the sight of Whivvle his feet acquired, as it were, the habit of the wheelwright's yard, and took him thither for no other purpose (as it sometimes seemed) than to use his handkerchief and say, "No, no! It did not matter. It was of no importance," when instead of the Fondie he had come to see, the wheelwright's beard emerged from the dimness of the workshop re-

marking: "Fondie's out. It's where he generally is when he's wanted. Is it owt I can tell him?"

Whivvle averred that Fondie Bassiemoor was become organist, choir-master, clerk, and curate in one, and said, "Next thing he will be wearing a squash hat and a parson collar"—though he never did. After service on a Sunday, carrying the books of sacred music beneath his arm, he was usually to be seen escorting the Vicar homeward, walking with solemn composure and deliberation to accommodate his movement to the Vicar's tardy step. The initiative of such procedure, as may be imagined, was never Fondie's own. It originated with the Vicar, who even laid his hand on Fondie's arm on these occasions, the better to engage his ear and employ him as a gentle aid to locomotion; and would crave the favor of "just another step or two, my friend," until, in solemn discourse, they reached the vicarage gate itself.

And there, of course, the Vicar disengaged his hand from Fondie's arm and thanked him, my friend; thanked him . . . and would not detain him further, or trespass on his time.

Beyond the gate the house stood wrapped in its impenetrable mantle of secretiveness, betraying no more sign of what it hid than does a tombstone of the dead below. Somewhere behind its lifeless windows Blanche was contained; the Blanche he had known; the Blanche he had dared so faithfully and hopelessly to love, and who was lost to him and to herself and all the world. It was a torturing and enervating thought. His heart beat violently while he stood in conjunction with the gate that had so often let her to and fro, so that he could scarce hear the Vicar's final words, on occasions, for the thudding of it. Perhaps, in the melancholy sickness of his soul, there lived a hope he might obtain some vision of her, howsoever fleeting; some glimpse like blessed manna from above, for his soul's sustenance and comfort.

But he never did. Nay, more. Being Fondie, he never even tried. And always, after he had taken leave, his soul reproached

him with a sense of something lost; of some occasion spoiled and wasted. Her name, on either side, was never mentioned. The daughter to whom the Vicar had so proudly and so fondly looked to dispossess him of the organ seat had no longer any place on her father's lips. Oh, if he could but have burst the veil of silence and of secrecy that wrapped her from the avowed fidelity of his soul, and taken the Vicar's hand and pressed it, and said what all his sickness yearned to say: ". . . I'd like to send my kind respects to Miss Blanche, sir, if I might venture . . . and you'd be so good as to convey 'em for me . . ."

But the words remained unuttered in the bosom that bore them. It is not for wheelwrights nor the sons of wheelwrights to rend Convention's secrecies, and burst the veil that drapes her nothingness and makes her terrible before the world.

XXX

THERE came a night in March when Fondie Bassiemoor, supper being over and the table cleared, and all the members of the family gone to bed, rose up from a letter he was writing to the well-wished and, inspired by those feelings of personal proximity that the composition of such a document evoked, went forth to pay his customary visit to the aud hoose. The night was clear and starry. A chill was in the air, but not the chill that speaks of winter; a chill, this was, that had something in its very chillness of the warmth and energy of spring. The buds were filling along the hedgerows that showed no longer bare and dead by day but gleamed with a rich and plumlike color when the sunlight lay upon them. Down amid the roots, arums and hedge-mustard, and all the wild green herbs that push their crowded way through last year's leaves to reach the warmth and light above, were growing up apace. The blackbirds and thrushes were tuning their lays from every branch and shrub. Only in Fondie's heart did this

joyful impulse of spring, that burst forth from myriad sources of bud and blossom, turn to a sadness and a sickening, as if the banquet spread were not for him.

He took the padlock in his hand and tried it. That and the gate he shook were very cold, and beaded with a fine dew that might (he thought) turn to a rime by sunrise. But both of them held firm and testified to his earlier care bestowed upon them. Through the wrought-iron of the gate he saw the dark silhouette of the house beyond. From one or two of its windows the starlight was reflected. All was very quiet; very peaceful; very sad. No breeze stirred the budded branches; as yet it was too early for the advent of the waning moon. To the southwest he saw the familiar glamour in the sky betokening Hunmouth. Sheep bleated, and with their bleat came the plaintive heart-stirring cry of the young lamb, so lately born into this world of sorrow, and already (so it seemed) divining the tragic pathos of it. He thought of the young gentleman. He thought of Blanche. He thought of many things deeply and sorrowfully with his hand upon the dewy gate, and then he let this go and rubbed the moisture from his palms upon his coat, and sighed his customary sigh and turned away.

. . . There were footsteps. Somebody stirred. Somebody swerved into the shadow of the hedge. Surely that was somebody's shape, and not mere darkness. He stopped inquiringly.

" . . . Fondie!"

His heart stood still, and then the blood, for one moment withheld, swept up to his brow and made it burning hot. In one instant, or so it seemed, his lips and tongue were dry. He had to moisten them, one against the other, before he could answer in his curiously untroubled voice: ". . . Aye. It's me, Miss Blanche. I hope I didn't startle you."

She came out from the blackness of the hedge that blotted her and stood discernible against the stars. She stood not too near; all the roadway was between them. She stood as though

mindful of the distance set for her by shame, and Fondie stood through trouble, forbearing to advance upon her; forbearing even to pierce with his eyes the darkness that screened her, or take that advantage of the night denied him by day. So for awhile they both stood, silent and acutely conscious, until, with an effort to break a silence in danger of growing formidable, she asked him what he did there. It was the old voice, and yet another; the old familiar voice he knew, yet unfamiliar and strange to him, as if something were gone from it or something added. A soberer, quieter voice, with all the laughter eliminated—the laughter that had caused its most prosaic questions to ring with a certain mockery in the past; as if life called for two things only: to be laughed with or laughed at.

"I was giving a look at gate, miss," Fondie answered, with a gravity that seemed to ask not the least question of the circumstance or hour. "Old gentleman and Mr. Lancelot's away. I mostlings gie a look round of a night, miss, before turning in ti bed." He spoke with a modest reassumption of the old Whivvle tongue. He could have made his speech finer had he wished, and more conformable to grammar, but his consideration shirked airing the least grace of superiority before misfortune, in presence of the Vicar's daughter. He was only Fondie Bassiemoor. He would have been horrified to let her think—of all people, at such an hour as this—he posed as anybody else.

She answered: Yes . . . she knew. "When are they coming back?"

"I couldn't tell, miss. Mr. Lancelot writes that aud gentleman is very bad to move."

"Where are they gone to?"

"To Hampshire, miss."

She said: "Oh . . . What a long time it seems since I saw you! It seems an age."

"It seems a long while, miss."

Silence fell again upon them; a deep and tideless sea from

which all Fondie Bassiemoor's anxious fishing could draw no single word—no query relevant or worth the asking. And then, all at once the voice of the Vicar's daughter broke out with an impulsiveness sick of dissimulation, recalling the old days. "Oh . . . say something, Fondie. Ask me something. Speak. . . . You know. It's no use pretending. You know all about it. You can't say you don't. Everybody does. It's in your mind. They've told you."

Yes. He couldn't deny it. They'd told him, miss—though he'd never asked them to. His voice, in its admission, was mournfully low.

"Well? . . ." He had no answer available for this; the answer invited by it was far too vast for his lips at that moment. "I suppose you've done with me now. I suppose you hate me, like everybody. You say it's all my fault, and I should have taken more care and looked out. You think I'm a low little beast."

In solitude and the privacy of his own heart, what a burning denial he could have made to such hard imputations! But now, with every impulse urging him and all his sympathies ablaze, such are the flaws and contradictions of man, he could only falter: "Me, miss? I trust not. I should be sorry to think you thought so badly of me as that."

She asked abruptly: "What do they say?"

He said, perplexedly: "Who, miss?"

"Everybody. They're all talking about me. I know they are. What are they saying? Go on. Tell me. *You know.*" And when he answered with an exceeding great and scrupulous discretion that it was bad to tell, miss; some said one thing and some said another; and as for him, he didn't listen to folk much more than he was forced, and what they said didn't make a deal of difference to him—she cut him short with the comment: "I knew you'd say that. You always do. You always screen people if you can. Who do they believe? Do they believe me or him? Go on. Say. I aren't frightened. I don't care

now. I can bear to be told anything. You must have heard. You know. Tell me."

Aye. He had heard. He knew. Beliefs were curiously conflicting things.

"Some folk believe you, miss," he answered slowly, after a battle with his conscience. He was sorry, even in speaking, that conscience had not suffered him to make a better job of it.

". . . You needn't add the rest!" It was almost the old Blanche that spoke. "I know. Lots believe it." Her voice shook as it uttered the hateful statement. "Lots do. I don't care. They can. It doesn't matter to me now. . . ." But she added, "Who do *you* believe?"

"I believe *you*, miss," Fondie answered with simple sincerity. "And whether I did or I didn't. . . ." he was approaching perilous grounds of confidence, ". . . it wouldn't make a deal of difference to what I think. I should side wi' you all same, miss, whatever you did."

She said: "You say so now. It's easy for *you*. If I was your sister you wouldn't. You'd do what Harold does, and be the same as him. I don't care. I did care once, but I don't now. I used to be frightened of what people would think and say. I aren't frightened now. They can say what they like. It doesn't hurt me. . . ." She stopped, and all at once—cudgeling his brain for some consolatory thing to say—he knew that she was weeping; and speech became impossible. He could only stand away from her, and respect by silence and his own tacit suffering the sanctity of her tears. They fell from her noiselessly, but he heard the convulsive intake of her breath and the sobbing pulsation of her bosom, that rent his very own. Oh, for a right from heaven, a mandate from God, to give to her the pity that he felt; to take her even into his unworthy arms and say, "Thus, and so, does God Himself forgive your fault and kiss away your sorrow and your tears!" But no such right was his, nor mandate came. She put away her handkerchief at last, as if impatient of her own weakness.

"Don't think I'm always crying. I aren't. I've almost forgotten how. I haven't cried for long enough. Not since Sunday. I don't know what made me now. . . . I didn't come out here for that."

Not for that. For what, then? Fondie found himself remotely speculating. But he scarcely framed the question to himself, and certainly he would have never uttered it to her. She must have known it, for she said after awhile:

"You're just the same, Fondie. You haven't altered a bit. You never ask anybody anything. Some folk would have wanted to know what I was doing out alone at this time."

"Would they, miss?" He asked the question wonderingly. Yes. Now she mentioned it, he supposed it was true.

"They'd have asked me lots of things. Everything they could think of and wanted to know, whilst they'd got the chance. But you don't. You seem as if you didn't care."

Even Fondie's diffidence arose at that, to defend him from such a charge.

"I do care, Miss Blanche," he said. "I doubt there's nobody i' Whivvle cares more than me."

He would have liked to say more; the words were on his tongue, but that fatal prudence checked them. She said, repeating with a sort of bitterness his accents: "*Miss Blanche!* Don't 'Miss' me, Fondie. I aren't 'Miss' any longer. I aren't anybody now. . . ."

"You're somebody to me, miss," he assured her.

"Nobody ever calls me 'Miss' but you," she continued. "You're the only one that does. Why do you? You needn't. Call me Blanche, and be done with it. I'd as soon you called me Blanche as anybody. What's the good of being so polite as you keep on being . . . now?"

His voice, thanking her for this voluntary offering of so great, so priceless a privilege, betrayed beyond a doubt his appreciation of the value of it.

". . . If I was to call you what you've been good enough to

ask me to call you, miss," he said, "I doubt you might notice it, and think, maybe, I was paying you less respect than I had done."

"Why should you pay me respect? You don't respect me. You can't respect me any longer . . . after what I've done. I don't deserve respect. Respect's no good to *me*."

He hesitated. There was blood about his temples and buzzing in his ears.

"Respect's maybe a word I use, miss," he told her in a lower voice, "in place of one I've less right to."

"What word's that? Say it!" she told him. "I aren't frightened. I don't care. You can say what you like to me, Fondie. Harold does."

There was only one word, he knew. Only one word that could express those surgent impulses within him; but at this hour and in this place and under these solemn circumstances the word clave to his tongue. It seemed a profanation to utter it; taking advantage of her loneliness and sorrow, and the dark. And yet she urged him, saying: "Go on. You can. You may. You might, Fondie."

He answered: "If I said it was 'affection,' miss, I beg you won't believe I used word in any bad sense, or hold you in any less esteem than I always have done."

She cried: "It isn't. It can't be. You've no affection for me. Nobody has. Not now. Not after what's happened."

Her incredulity lent him courage. "It's a plain [poor] word, I know, for what I feel, miss," he confessed. "I made word as plain as I could for fear but what it might offend you. But it's true. I can't make myself feel any different from what I do, and what I always have done. Maybe there's folk mud say I ought to feel different if I'd any right feeling about me, but if right feeling would alter what I do feel I'd rather have wrong feeling, miss, and go on like I am going."

All at once she was in tears again, saying:

"Oh, Fondie! . . . Why wasn't everyone like *you*? You

never blame anybody. People could do whatever they wanted if it was only *you*! They could sin as much as they liked, and you'd let them. You'd never say a word. I used to say you were a silly fool, and sickening. I know I did. I don't care. I admit it. I used to think so too." She paused, and this pause and the tone of voice in which she had broken off led him almost to expect the qualifying words, "But *now* . . ." Instead, she exclaimed with a sudden new lease of conviction: "And you are a silly fool. You must be a silly fool to go on caring for *me*. I am not worth caring for. Nobody else does. *He* doesn't. I don't care for myself. I don't know myself. I can't believe it's me. I hate myself. I wish I was dead." For awhile he sensed the evidences of a bosom in commotion, of breaths sharp drawn, of sobs combated and overcome. And then, out of the turmoil, plenished with fresh resolve, her voice came to him. "I *won't* cry. I won't. People would only like me to. They'd like to know I was wretched. They'd be glad. They'd say it served me right. I know what they'd say. I've heard them say it, about other girls. I never cry for myself. I only cry for what people say and think. It's them that make me miserable. If there weren't any people in the world I shouldn't cry at all. I aren't sorry for what I've done; I'm only sorry for what's happened—and I'm only sorry for that because of them. I only care because of them. It's them that keep me indoors. If it wasn't for them, I should come and see you every day, like I did before, Fondie, and sit on the bench whilst you were at work." She had dried her eyes, and that early unfamiliarity in her voice seemed altogether gone. ". . . You don't know how I miss those afternoons with you."

"I miss them too, miss," Fondie's troubled voice acknowledged.

"Do you?" She had come closer of her own accord, and stood—not within hand's reach, but at least so near that he could see the starlight kindled in her eyes.

"More than I durst say, I do, miss," Fondie told her.

She said: "Do you know what made me come out here tonight? You don't . . . you haven't even asked. I'll tell you. It was to see you."

The intelligence took all his modesty by storm, and swept up hot to his hair-roots.

"It's a great compliment to me, miss," he found himself saying, groping after the words blindly, as a man gropes after matches in the dark. "I wish only I was worthier of it."

"It's the first time I've ever been out of doors since . . . since, *you* know. Often and often I've thought of you in the workshop and said, 'Oh, if I could only go and see Fondie Bassiemoor and sit with him!' But I dursn't. I've cried about it. And last Sunday, when I saw you at the gate with father, and you never looked, and never even seemed so much as to be thinking about me . . . I said: 'I will go. I won't stop in for them. If I can't go out in daytime I'll go out at night.' I knew you always came to look at the old house. Aleck said you did."

"I'm only thankful I had thought to come when I did, miss," Fondie told her. "Somehow or other, I didn't feel very much like coming for a piece after I'd got my supper. Then, all of a sudden I made up my mind, and came." For awhile his lips hung fire over a suggestion of Providence, but the thought was too difficult to phrase. He said instead: "I hope you hadn't been stood waiting of me long, miss."

"Not so very long. I've been stood again the wall where I climbed over that evening, and you helped me. Do you remember, Fondie?"

Did he remember? "I'se not likely to forget it, miss," he said.

In a burst of emancipated memory she testified to the gloriousness of that bygone age of gold. "They were good old days, Fondie! What times we used to have!" And all at once, as if she had been some traveler returned from long sojourn in a distant land, her recollections from a hundred sources seemed

to flow. Did Fondie remember this? Had Fondie forgotten that? She plied Fondie with questions touching the world he lived in—the world to which she herself was strange; asking of his daily life and doings; his work, his books, his organ; drinking knowledge with the eager thirst of long abstinence. Laughter all but revisited her lips, these many weeks unused to it, in the zeal with which she plunged back into the past—the only hospitable tense now open to her—and lived again, more vividly and consciously, the moments life had wasted on her then. From the depths of her touched and grateful heart she told the wheelwright's son: "It's good to hear your voice again, Fondie. You don't know how good. After being shut up there all these weeks, with nobody to talk to." She told him of her own life there. "You won't believe, Fondie. You'll laugh. You'll say I aren't speaking the truth. I work every bit of the day now. I'm always downstairs by six." She sketched out the program of her daily duties, telling him what he knew: "I used to hate housework once. I thought it sickening. But now . . . I don't care. I don't mind. I rather like it. It's fun!" Then, revolting at its own mendacity, her soul protested: "No, it isn't. And I don't. I hate it. I hate everything. I hate getting up. I hate going to bed. I only do it to keep off thinking. You don't know how awful it is, Fondie. It's like being dead. I feel as if I haven't any right to anything any longer. I've no right to eat or drink or be alive . . . in a house that I've brought disgrace to. I'm not like him. He can go away and get out of it all. That's why he doesn't come back to Merham. He dursn't. He's frightened. What would he feel like if he was *me*? I can't get out of it. I can't tell lies like him, and say I never did it, and it's somebody else. I'm tied to it. People will be able to see for themselves very soon whether I've done it or not. I've got to stop at home and eat food I've never earned, and that I can't earn now. . . . Oh, if only I was a man! If only I was a man, Fondie, what a devil I would be!"

Ah! It was true. Man had great privileges; beautiful facilities for sin; a character as washable as any sanitary wall-paper. Man was much to be envied, as every girl before Blanche's time knew and every other that came after would learn either by precept or in the bitter school of hard experience. And yet, as Fondie Bassiemoor sadly said to comfort her, "I wouldn't care to be some men, miss." He was thinking, perhaps, of one man only, and the judgment of a wheelwright's son is calculated, after all, to be but warped.

"Well . . ." She flung off suddenly the bitterness that possessed her, and turned her face to the stars. "I suppose I must be going back to it. Tomorrow's washday; I've got to be up early. What's the time, Fondie?"

He drew out his watch and pressed its dial to his eyes. "Turned half-past ten, miss," he said, with an accent of some concern. "Is anybody sitting up for you?"

"I don't know. Father may be. Harold's at the music-hall in Hunmouth. He won't be home while the late train. If he *had* been I couldn't have come. He's ten times worse than father. I can stand father now. Father saw me come out. He never stopped me. He only asked if I thought I ought to be out with myself at night . . . and I said nobody would see me, and anyway . . . it didn't matter. Nothing could happen to me now. I've no character, or anything, to lose.

". . . Are you going to set me back as far as the gate, Fondie? You are, aren't you? Or are you frightened of being seen along with me?"

It had been in his mind, as a desire, deeply felt, haunting him in the guise of an interrogation, and he responded eagerly to the proposal.

"If my company's only agreeable to you, I should be proud, miss."

They walked together, closer than heretofore, beneath the stars. Now and again in the darkness their arms even touched, and a thrill of unbelievable emotion coursed through Fondie's

being at that fortuitous contact. It was Blanche. Blanche, the Vicar's daughter, whom he had thought lost to him forevermore; to whom himself was one, the least, among her memories. They left the aud hoose behind them; they threaded the lane, talking in companionable undertones; they passed the church; they came to a standstill, with mutual discretion, in sight of the vague dark contour of the vicarage. Blanche put out her hand, and Fondie's hand closed upon it. ". . . Good-bye, Fondie!" She stayed the words already shaped for utterance on his lips. "Don't say that! Don't ever say it again. You're the only friend I've got; the only one I could turn to, Fondie. Say 'Blanche.'"

It was a gigantic offering; a stupendous tribute. So great, indeed, that gratitude could find no voice wherewith to register its most unworthy thanks, to take or to decline. Gratitude could only hold the hand it held already, and swallow mutely the words that turned to lumps within its throat.

"Don't you want to?" She put his diffidence to scorn. "Go on! Don't be a silly fool, Fondie. What's it matter now?"

What did it matter? It mattered everything, to him. It mattered more than she, or anybody, knew or could have had the faculty to divine. But he said it. Heaven knows how, or what mysterious power was vouchsafed to him at the last; for the task, at such close quarters, seemed almost superhuman. He heard another voice—a hoarse and coarse and brutal ungovernable voice—that broke out from the vicinity of his necktie—take the name of the Vicar's daughter in vain and say:

"Good-bye . . . Blanche."

And then he scarcely knew what happened, for his ears were filled with buzzings and roarings, like a defective telephone receiver. It seemed to him that a voice—not the voice that had blasphemed, but the voice of the Vicar's daughter—responded: "Good-bye, then, Fondie. Thank you for setting

me. Thank you for all you've said. Perhaps . . . some night, I shall see you again. . . ."

It seemed, indeed, that this voice of the Vicar's daughter said these things; but when Fondie Bassiemoor sought to put his recollections to the test as he drew into the main street, he could not be sure. He was as a man coming to his senses from the effects of fever, revelation, or intoxicant. His feet trod on nothing, and that most irregularly, as if no longer subject to any control of his own. All sorts of wild and senseless exaltations filled his head, to which no words or reason could be fitted; as if a choir of vanities rejoiced for some achievement of his own, and knew not rightly what. He had gone forth despondent; he came home imbued with strange new courage. No saint of old, visited in his solitary and unsavory cell by some shining angel of the Lord, ever sought his pallet with a more trembling sense of celestial bliss than did Fondie Bassiemoor that night, stirred by this beatific vision of the Vicar's daughter.

XXXI

HE tried the padlock with his fingers; he shook the gate; he stood with both hands upon the iron crossbar and gazed through the darkness of the shrubbery at the compacter darkness beyond, where the roof and chimneys of the aud hoose blacked out the stars. He heard the same nocturnal sounds; the mournful bleat of ewes; the faltering and childlike cry of young lambs; the huge reiterated cough heaved from some big bovine chest where the stock chewed or slept in the shelter of their warm strawed foldyard. Something rubbed persuasively around his legs, and a vigorous and friendly thrumming filled the air. Now the butting head, and now the erect and rigid tail of the aud hoose cat provoked his kind attention, seeming to testify that loneliness is not the preroga-

tive of mankind alone, and that not only human hearts go hungry. He stopped to stroke the ingratiatory animal, and from his pocket drew those meaty scraps with which he never failed to come provided. If only the cravings of the human heart could be so readily appeased.

And yet he had not really cause for discontent. Heaven had been very kind to him; kinder than he deserved. In the fortnight that had elapsed since his first celestial vision, Heaven had granted him two more. Twice, standing at the gate like this, he had been blessed with the apparition of the Vicar's daughter, and for a sacred space they had conversed together. Only on subsequent reflection did it seem to him inexplicably strange that he, of all men in the world, should engage in sober conversation with a creature of the other sex, discussing, without prudery or reserve or passion, subjects that but a brief while before he would have blushed to think of in her presence, or let her think were ever in his mind. But just as men make light of death till in the presence of it, and sickness consecrates the mortal in man's nature and makes it hallowed, so does knowledge born of sorrow seem to be most holy, and lips may speak of it in reverent tones and do no wrong. That she was of one sex and he another counted for less than naught. A greater thing than sex effaced this artificial barrier dividing human hearts. They stood, the two of them, like inquiring children, before the throne of this implacable and ruthless wisdom, and talked of it with candor, as children do of God. She confided her daily doings, her thoughts, her fears; and he lent her what he lent to the young gentleman of the aud hoose: the refuge of a calm, contented mind; a mind of spacious equanimity, like the soft sky that had spread above the aud hoose on the night that Blanche, with his blushing assistance, climbed its wall. Then—and how recently it seemed—she had been but a girl, indulging a girl's appetite for escapade. Now . . . now she was but a girl still, bearing a woman's burden; crushed and bowed beneath a weight that no human hand

could lighten or remove. Often he thought of it, of the vast and awful injustice of it, in his placid, uncomplaining way. For if it was a punishment (as some there were who said), then it came of God, and was indeed a hard and ruthless punishment to lay upon the shoulders of a child like this. And if it were not of God . . . why, then, he knew not what to think. If it were not of God, by what text or authority did a whole world conspire to punish her for what the Lord let go free? Surely God did not punish twice over for the same offense; He did not chastise souls in this world and the next? And if sufferings were sent as trials (as others said), then did not Blanche's suffering bear the seal of divine instigation which should hush all these whispering and scornful lips? Was not this terrible loss of her character and good name no less a trial sent of God than the loss of a first-born or the death of someone dear? He wished, haunted by such inscrutable perplexities, that he had had the Vicar's learning to solve them by the Book, heedless of how little the Vicar's learning served its owner in this same crisis, and how little human sorrow can be solved by print.

"Fondie. . . ."

He started from the gate at once, stepping with caution to avoid the friendly animal at his feet.

"Aye . . . it's me, miss," he replied. It was his instinctive formula, as his own name was hers. Despite the sanction given him and the freedom of their discourse, his lips hesitated to say "Blanche," as his muddy boots would have scrupled to profane (without apology and much persuasion) a new-clayed doorstep, or as he would have shrunk from entering the House of God without uncovering his head.

She drew nearer to him than she had done on that initial occasion, when shame imposed its distance on her, but not so near as she would have drawn in the old flamboyant days; and she stood motionless, with no swing of arms or throw of the head. "I can't stop, Fondie," she told him. "Harold will

be back any time. He's gone to Merensea on his bicycle. Don't say 'Indeed, miss,' like you always do. Say something else. And don't ask me 'What?' like I know you want to. Say 'It's sickening.' Say anything. Swear if you like—I wish you would. But you never do. You're no help for that."

Behind the semi-mockery of her words he was conscious of a bitterness recently roused. Still speaking on the theme of her brother, she said: "He's awful. You don't know what he is, Fondie. It's all very well for you. You haven't him to put up with."

Perhaps Fondie's silence, erring on the side of discretion, might appear provocative to a soul smarting under a recent grievance, but Fondie's brain was very busy, and Fondie's lips were shaping words and sentences that had no immediate reference to the topic chosen. He offered a platitude for her consolation. "I know some folk can be bad to bide at times," he said. After the last word in his sentence the pause in his breath indicated a word still lacking for its completion. And as the word could have been but "Blanche" or "miss," and as his courage was not yet sufficiently kindled for the one, nor his diffidence quite capable of the other, he left the sentence uncompleted.

She broke new matter with her next words: "They're coming home again, Fondie."

"Yes, they're coming home again. . . ." And in a low and hurried voice: "Do you wish me to call you same name as before, miss?"

She said: Of course she did. Did he think she would have asked him if she hadn't? He seemed as if he couldn't believe.

In a contrite voice he begged forgiveness for this Thomasian spirit in him, and said habit was a hard thing to break, and his tongue tripped over it. And he called her "Blanche"—with the inevitable shock to his own propriety, even at her behest—and told her: "After next week at this time I shall

have no call to come of a night and see if aud hoose is safe."

She said, "Next week!" as if next week had a terror of its own and its proximity disquieted her.

Fondie, subscribing sadly to her concern, said, "Aye! Time flies, I know."

"I wish they weren't coming back," she exclaimed, and in the same breath corrected herself: "No, I don't. It's nothing to do with them. They've a right to come back if they like. They can for what I care. It isn't *their* fault." And, suddenly breaking down this equivocation, she discharged her soul. Fondie did not know how wretched she really was. She seemed to alter as soon as she came near Fondie.

Fondie thought, because she talked to him and told him things, and asked him things . . .

Fondie thought she was no different from what she'd always been. Fondie thought she didn't care and didn't trouble and didn't fret. Fondie was wrong; he was wrong. She did care. Who could help caring, with Harold? Harold had got started again now. He hadn't been saying anything or taking any notice of her this last week. And tonight he'd begun again after tea, asking: What was being done, and what was going to happen to her? As if she wasn't thinking about it all the while! . . . "He says . . ." She poured forth her trouble with the high-bosomed resentment that is but weeping in disguise. "He says it can't take place at home. He says: 'Not likely. I needn't think it.' As if I ever did think it. As if I ever wanted it to take place anywhere. . . . He says: 'Not in a vicarage.' I must be got somewhere else. I must be got away somewhere. He says he has his position at the office to think of. He says I ought to have been got away before . . . and when father asked him, 'Where?' he only said: 'I don't care where. Anywhere away from *here*, at any rate. She never goes out. She never shows herself. It's making a fool of the whole affair. . . .'"

She poured out to her complaisant friend and listener in the

words of burning remembrance that preserved with unmistakable fidelity the very tones and phrases of the speakers, the record of the miserable conference that had risen and raged over the tea-table.

"Father was all right till Harold started. Father's never said a word. He's gone errands, and fetched things home himself so as people wouldn't have to come to the door; and told them there might be nobody at home, and if so they were to leave the things in the shed, and it would be all right. And Aleck's done things for me, so as I needn't be seen. But Harold never has. Harold says: 'Why should he?' He says *he* doesn't want to be mixed up in it. He says I ought never to have blurted it out like I did. I ought to have kept my mouth shut and told nobody, and gone away before it got about; and he's not going to stay in the house and have the doctor calling to see his own sister. . . ."

Rebellion broke down at that, dissolving into the fluid thing it was at heart, and wept: "Oh, Fondie! If only I'd had a brother or somebody like you—to stick up for me and take my part. He says it's my fault. What if it is? I know it is. I've said so. I've admitted it. What's the good of admitting things . . . just to be bullied and blamed all the same? He ought to be sorry for me. Anybody would that knew how wretched I am. He'd be sorry if it was *him*. And he's a man, and men are supposed to stand things. I'm only a girl. . . . But I won't stand it, if I am a girl. I won't, Fondie. I won't. I'll do something."

He had listened to her all this time with the sorrowful, implicit silence that seems to offer itself as a propitiatory sacrifice to grief, but on a sudden the thoughts that had been seething behind his lips took shape, and he spoke her name with an inflection and a purpose new to him.

". . . Blanche!"

His altered accent impressed even the girl's despair, for at the sound of it her tears ceased, and she raised her head with

the sharpened curiosity that despair assumes at times, demanding, "What?"

Perhaps the knowledge of her complete attention unnerved his purpose. He did not answer all at once, and when he did so his voice had lost the steadiness with which it first uttered her name.

"There's something I'd like to say," he told her hurriedly, and, as it seemed, beseechingly. "Something I'd like to venture to ask you. Something that's been on my mind a long while—that's on my mind now. Something very important . . . if only you'd give me permission, and wouldn't judge amiss of me if it's anything I ought to ha' kept to myself by rights, and not spoken, even now. . . ."

She asked wonderingly, "What is it?"

"It's this . . . miss," said Fondie, and she did not challenge his deliberate relapse into the ancient respectfulness of address, deeming that he had his reason for that, too, which this other purpose would explain. "You've shown me marks o' favor above anybody else. You've put confidence in me . . . that I trust you'll never regret, nor I shall never abuse. You've told me . . . I was only friend you had. You've gone so far as to wish everybody was like me—though for world's sake it's well they aren't, miss. But the feelings you have for me are nothing to feelings I have for you. We called them 'affection' the other day, miss, but affection's no name for 'em. It's like calling sun moon." He spoke very rapidly and quietly, as though on guard to preserve his tongue against any exaggeration or passion that might do violence to his own feelings or hers. ". . . I've never had but one feeling for you, miss, since day I was old enough to have any. You know now what that feeling is, without me having to name it, in case it isn't to your approval. . . . But if you thought after what I've said . . . you could trust yourself to such rough hands as mine, miss, that aren't worthy of you, I know . . . they'd ask nothing better than to work for you and do all they knew to give you

what happiness and comfort was in their power, and stand up for you, and shield you from harm."

She asked with a catch of the breath, "What do you mean, Fondie? How?"

He answered: "In any way you judged best, Miss Blanche."

"Do you mean . . ." her voice became incredulous, ". . . marry me?"

"Aye! . . . It sounds presumptuous, I know, miss," Fondie said, as though acquiescing in a rebuke administered. "And maybe you'll be right in telling me that I should never ha' ventured to presume if you hadn't been in trouble. I'm taking advantage of you, just as much as other folk. I'm snatching chance just because I've got it, miss, and there's no saying I aren't. But it's what I do mean, and I won't try and save myself by denying it."

She said, as if all her judgment were lost in stupefaction: "Fondie . . . you can't . . . you don't . . . Not after what's happened!"

He treated the objection gravely, with the ingenuous simplicity of a nature that understands nothing of the transmutation of words.

"There's some might say so, I know, miss," he agreed. "They might say I shouldn't ought to do it if I'd any pride. But pride's no good to me, Miss Blanche. If a man's conscience doesn't serve him, I know very well his pride won't. Besides . . . there's prides and prides. There's prides that nobbut puffs a man up . . . and prides that strengthen him. I should be prouder wi' you, Miss Blanche . . . than any other man in England is wi' all pride he can muster. With you for my pride I could almost hope to be a better man than I have been."

She burst out: "What's the use! You know you wouldn't. . . . You dursn't, Fondie."

"With you, and for you, miss," Fondie answered simply, "I durst do almost anything. There's not many things I couldn't

and wouldn't do, whatever they were . . . good things or bad things. Not that I blame you for saying so, for I've said same to myself many a time. I've told folk I should never leave my father so long as old man lived, and I should stay wi' him and wi' my mother all time they were spared. And folk said more fool me, and I see now they knew me better than I knew myself. Book was right when it tells us for what sake a man shall leave his father and mother. Aye . . . leave both them, and home he was brought up in, and go anywhere. To the other end of Yorkshire, miss. Right across the seas, if you think good, to the other end of the world, where folk wouldn't know us or ask questions, or say unkind things. Not that I shouldn't be sorry to leave Whivvle, but only you went with me there's not very much of Whivvle I should leave behind. Mr. Lancelot will soon be going an' all, and pleast won't seem same. . . .

" . . . I've got money of my own i' bank, enough to take us where we want to go and keep us nicely going until I find work. And I've confidence to think it wouldn't be long before I did, for work's a thing I've never been frightened of yet, and it's such men as me they say they want, miss, out there."

She stood silent, plunged in all the surging possibilities and potentialities thrown open by his avowal. Here was liberty at last. Here, undreamed till now, was a way out from this dire imprisonment of her self and soul. Here was a way of reprisal on her tormentors, of escape from all who scorned her; who rejoiced at heart by reason of her downfall and distress. Her brother said she must be got away. She could be got away without him. She could prove herself independent of his authority and control. She asked Fondie, and her voice trembled with the eagerness of hope:

"When?. . . When do you mean?"

He answered: "Any time you like, miss. In a week, maybe . . . or less." He would have made his words "Tomorrow," but the remembrance of his obligations to the aud hoose

checked him, and he said: "I couldn't very well take off till aud gentleman and Mr. Lancelot's back. But once they're home again . . . there's nothing to stop me. I'd draw money out of bank. . . . You could have what you wanted, miss, if there's anything you need."

Still she stood, whelmed in the gusts and surges of her own imagination; in those wild hopes and aspirations roused like fierce winds by his words, that blew about her and made her very being tremble. Before that gale of passionate desire, sober reason and stern realities were swept like leaves; like chaff about the stackgarth on a threshing day when the wind rolls from the west. And then the fierce onslaught of exultation died away as suddenly as it had begun, and her soul relapsed into the despair of dreadful fact.

"It's no use, Fondie!" He almost believed for awhile, for a moment, she buried her face in her hands. "It's too late. You know it's too late. . . . Oh, why didn't you say all that before! Why have you waited, like you have, till now!"

"I blame myself," he answered guiltily. "If I hadn't been a coward, I should ha' done. But I couldn't bring myself to it, somehow. For one thing, I felt too much respect for you, miss."

"Respect!" Her voice seemed to tear the word in twain as if it had no significance or value for her. "I didn't want respect. Nobody else gave me respect. Why should you? Father was always talking about respect, and saying I ought to respect myself and make myself respected, and I hated the very word. . . ." She went on: "It isn't as if I hadn't given you chances, Fondie. I have. I've given you lots; as many as anybody. But you never seemed to see them. And of course I couldn't *ask* you."

"I saw some of them, miss," Fondie corrected her. "But I . . ."

"But you didn't *take* them," she threw in. "If only you had have done, perhaps this would never have happened. Or

at least if it had, it would have been you; and you wouldn't have said I was a liar, like him, and left me to face it out alone. Oftens and oftens I've wanted to be fond of you . . . and I could have been with the least bit of encouragement from you. But it was always harmoniums or books or organs or something, and I thought in the end you cared for everything and everybody more than me."

"I only wanted to make myself worthy of you, miss," Fondie told her penitently.

"But I didn't want you to be worthy of me!" she protested. "All I wanted you to do was to make yourself nice. And while you were making yourself worthy of me, as you call it, time was going by. What was *I* to do? How long did you expect me to wait?"

"I see my error, miss," he acknowledged. "But I said to myself you were Vicar's daughter, and I was only wheelwright's son."

"Well! . . . And it doesn't matter how worthy you'd made yourself," she pointed out to him, "you'd still have been that. Besides . . . if you'd made me fond of you I shouldn't have cared what you were, or whose son you'd been. And now . . ." she reverted to her early cry, "it's too late. It's too late."

"Not for me, miss," Fondie assured her earnestly. "Not too late for me, if it isn't too late for you."

"It's too late for both of us, Fondie," she declared. "You say it because you pity me, and because you're sorry for me, and because you want to help me if you can. Because I've cried to you, and told you how wretched I was. You'd help anyone. Everybody knows that, and takes advantage of it. But if I was to marry you . . . it wouldn't alter things. It wouldn't be yours, when it came; it would be his still—for all he says it isn't, and that it's somebody else's. And it would always remind you. You'd say: 'She only married me because she couldn't marry him; because *he* didn't want her, and

wouldn't have her.' No, no. You shan't, Fondie." She wrung out her final decision almost fiercely. "I won't let you. It's not fair. It's not fair to let you saddle yourself with other people's leavings. Harold wouldn't. *I* wouldn't if I was a man. I'd see anybody far enough first that had treated me like I've treated you. They'd say it was me that had tricked you into it, and not you that had wanted to. . . . And they'd say it was yours all along, and I'd only been trying it on with him. . . . Oh, you don't know what they'd say! They'd say everything."

"I'll chance what people say, miss," he affirmed. "They say plenty about me as it is, for all I know. And it's not them I'm doing it for, nor yet, I doubt, for you; it's for myself, miss; and if I didn't want you so badly as I do want you, maybe I should do same as you say you'd do if place was changed." He tried to plead with her, and for awhile she lent ear as if her inclination went with it, but just when he began to draw hope from his own advocacy she swept it all aside again, and said: No, no! She wouldn't listen to him. It wasn't fair. She wouldn't hear him. "Don't, Fondie!" she cried, and there was pain in the cry, as if his continuance of the topic cut and hurt her. "I can't bear it. It only shows me what a fool I've been. Don't make things worse for me to bear than what they are. Day after day I've been hoping all sorts of hopes, and built on them, and they've every one failed. Don't give me another to cling to. Something will happen to that like it's happened to all the rest. I don't know what. Anything. Nothing can help me now; I'm sure it can't. If you could have said, 'Run away with me tonight! Let's go now; straight away!' . . . I don't know what I might have said. I might have said . . . oh, anything! But as it is you can't. There's the house to think of, and the cat to feed. And by the time they come back . . ."

He did not deny it. All his soul strained to cry out, "I'll forfeit everything, miss, for you. I'll go now. I'll leave cat

to starve; and house to look after itself . . . only you'll say word!"—but that stronger power within, that inner soul that subordinated all his selfish longings and desires to its strict, unflinching rule, restrained him and held him tongue-tied and conscience-bound.

She said of a sudden: "Come, Fondie! I shall have to run. Harold will be back by now. If he is! . . . Don't tell me what time it's got to."

"At least . . ." he begged of her as together they moved quickly along the lane, ". . . at least you'll keep my words in mind, miss. You won't forget I've said them, and that I mean them. You'll think them over when you're by yourself?"

She answered: "How do you expect I can do anything else? I shall be thinking of them all night. I shall always be thinking of them. I shan't be able to forget them."

". . . And next time we meet," he urged her, "I trust you'll see your way to view them more favorably, miss. I shall live in hopes you will. It's what I shall chiefly live for. There's not a moment you're ever out of my mind."

She said: "Don't come any farther. You'd best not, to-night. There'll be an awful row if Harold was to see you. Not that you need be frightened of *him*. You could soon settle *him*. But still . . . Good night, Fondie. And thank you ever, ever so much."

He answered huskily, "Good night, miss."

"You're not angry? Aren't you going to call me 'Blanche' any more?"

He said the 'Blanche' she asked for—breathing it, rather, with the reverence befitting an Amen.

"Angry with *you*, Blanche! I only feel I'd like you to give me a better right to name before I use it. Next time, maybe. . . . Good night, Blanche, and God bless you. There's nothing of His that's dearer or more sacred in my heart."

And with that benediction she took her leave, going from him with a rapid, semi-running step to meet the uncertain

welcome of the house of shameful mystery that was her home. He stood until the last vestige, the last sound of her was swallowed up in the nighttide, as he might have stood within some sacred building after prayer, reluctant to disturb or break by movement the divine communion.

Why was this being, of all beings in the world, so dear to him? Why was this errant and imperfect creature, whose mortal flesh confessed its fault before the righteous, fleshly world of judges, so obstinately worshiped by his soul among God's most sacred and worshipable things?

God knew and knows alone. The answer is with Him in Heaven, where all His other mysteries are housed and hid, and not on earth among the finite questioning sons of men.

XXXII

THE ring of a horse's shoe or the rumble of a cartwheel has a very different value in the country from that which attaches to it in the town. In the town it is mere noise, multiplied by frequency into distraction; in the country it is knowledge, magnified by rarity into significance. Not unusually it tells as much as a whole paragraph in the Hunmouth evening paper, costs a ha'penny less, and is more reliable. The Press may err; and print, particularly in a bad light, is trying and difficult to read; but a horse or spring-cart practices no deception. On the same night that the old gentleman and the young came back to the aud hoose, and smoke curled up from no fewer than four chimneys, the carrier's wife, disrobing in her bedchamber, imposed a sudden silence on her husband with an authoritative "Wisht!"

"I mun ha' my trousers off, hooivver," her husband protested, for the sound to which his wife had taken exception was the unsubdued rattle of his braces on the bedroom floor. "Thoo wouldn't ha' me get into bed wi' 'em on."

She cried "Wisht!" again, more peremptorily. "Hod thy noise. Don't talk so fond. What's yon?"

To town ears it would have seemed anything rather than the thing it was: the sound of the carrier's breathing; the straining of his stockinged feet upon the thinly carpeted floor; the creak of the carrier's wife's corset, or the rustle of her dress—anything, indeed, but a horse and trap, so indistinct and distant as to suggest no vestige of interest or topic for speculation to town-bred hearing. But to the carrier's wife, versed in all the likely times of every likely noise, and knowing the approximate hour of every horse and cart upon the road, such an unexpected sound came as opportune and as richly charged with possibilities as any street accident to dwellers in the city. "It's not Warkup cart. . . . It can't be Marritt. . . . Yon's too brisk for Stevens' galloway. Draper dizzn't call while Friday. Butcher's not like to come round by Mersham. . . . Nay! Nor it's not Vicar wi' buggy. Can it be Rector, think ye?" She arrived at hypothesis by swift exhaustion of probabilities. "Hark! Aye. That's him! She clicked again. Yon's Rector's mare fro' Mersham."

Her husband, more intent on bed than speculation, answered laconically, "Not it, missus. Get into bed wi' thee."

"If it isn't Rector's mare and trap, who is it, then?" she demanded conclusively; and as her husband made no immediate answer, took her triumph whilst she had it. "It's his, thoo may depend. Nobbut thoo listens thoo'll hear trap drive back again. What's it doing oot this time o' night? Not fetching doctor fro' Merensea? That's ower far.' Beside . . . Merensea doctor dizzn't attend 'em. Nor it can't be going to station, hooivver, for Whivvle's a good two mile farther to drive than Mersham. . . . Is it going to vicarage, think ye? Noo, you may depend! As like as not Rector's driving himself. Robert! Diz thoo hear? What's thoo doing? Don't tell me thoo's dropped asleep already!"

Not that she needed any assistance from her husband on

behalf of her own certitude that was independent alike of his acquiescence or his contradiction. And her certitude was right. It was the Rector's mare and the Rector's dogcart, and the Rector's self with the Rector's gardener-groom beside him, that rounded the corner into Whivvle, and passed down the main street as Fondie passed up. And although Fondie met the trap and its two occupants face to face, and the lamplight flashed into his eyes at point-blank range, and he saw foam flecked from the horse's bit, he knew (being Fondie) less concerning the horse and vehicle than did the carrier's wife, withdrawing hairpins from her head behind the small candle-lit looking-glass in the bedroom where already her husband's breathing betokened him well on the way to slumber.

Fondie stopped and turned to look after the trap, it is true, like one who wakens on a sudden to brief and doubtful consciousness from dreams. But the impulse came too late. Already the dogcart was gone from sight, and, being gone, he asked himself no questions touching it, as pride and proper feeling should have done. His mind, as usual, was full of other things. The occupants of the aud hoose were back again. He had shaken hands with Mr. Lancelot whilst the old gentleman's back was turned, and responded to Mr. Lancelot's subsequent expressions of fervid gratification to be home again with a certain Judas-like misgiving—a certain self-reproach that told him his own gratification was less ardent than, by right, it should have been; that he had not deserved so richly of Mr. Lancelot's friendship and esteem as conscience might have cared to think. All his evening, subsequent to their arrival, had been spent in company of the occupants of the aud hoose—and that not idly. He had lent a hand with their luggage; he had rendered to the old gentleman a scrupulous return of his stewardship. He had disinterred the priceless family silver from beneath the bed, and tallied its pieces punctiliously one by one against the old gentleman's inventory. And he had helped to remove the winding-sheets of newspaper

in which the priceless paintings had been swathed from the injurious damp and light of day, and stood with his heart in his mouth whilst the old gentleman subjected each canvas to the terrible scrutiny of eye and tactile forefinger. Already, with Isaac Marfitt's wife, he had seen to the airing of the beds; and with Isaac Marfitt's wife had made these up again, and fitted the rooms for human occupation. And he had replenished the scuttles with coal and pumped water up to the big cistern in the house roof, and busied himself with the thousand and one duties that nobody but Fondie Bassiemoor would ever have conceived or undertaken—duties that even the paid flunkies and fat-legged menials of Mersham in Sir Lancelot's days would have scorned to do, declaring it was not their work. And last of all, he had made his best respects to the old gentleman and said: If there was nothing else, sir, in which he could be of any use, he'd take liberty to bid him and Mr. Lancelot good night, sir. With which, being in receipt of the old gentleman's august and condescending sanction to go, he went. Mr. Lancelot went with him as far as the gate (under pretext of locking it and making all fast for the night), and there they conversed, the two of them, until the old gentleman's voice, calling on his grandson impatiently by name from the front door, drove Fondie Bassiemoor homeward in a hurry; at least it drove him as far as the wall-end in a hurry, when (on other evenings) a voice had uttered "Fondie!" and Heaven had blessed his ecstatic eyesight with a vision. And there, for some while longer, he hung on his heel, inspired by this hope—ardent at first, and burning with such keen combustion that it seemed every instant it must burst into the blaze of realization. But the night was cloudy, and heaven had no eyes. He walked by way of the lane that he and the vision splendid had traversed together. The rains of late had made it very sodden and clarty to the foot. Perhaps for that reason she had not come tonight. And yet, the Blanche of old had never been deterred by rains or roads. He paused by the vicarage gate, walking swiftly and

furtively on the far side of the road, like a thief who fears his guilty purpose may be read. Without actually looking at the gate—for that his guilty conscience did not dare to do—he had the consciousness that it was void. No voice hailed him. No supplicative whisper stayed his foot. He walked on, swiftly and furtively, unchecked; and so into the main street: steeped in himself; wrapped in that deepening sense of disappointment for lost endeavor and purpose brought to naught. A score of speculations occupied him as the Rector's dogcart drove by. Was her absence omen of ill or good for him? Had she thought, in the quietude of her own heart and home, of the proposal that his lips had so inadequately made to her, and that his bosom had reinforced with such burning desires and arguments since then? True, there had been no question of her meeting him this evening. Yesterday, indeed, being the last evening of his service at the aud house, had seemed to offer a better justification for her coming. Had she fallen into serious trouble at home on the occasion of her previous return, after taking leave of him? Or had reflection on his words deepened her disfavor of them, and caused her to view his presumption in a stronger and less indulgent light?

He did not know. He had no means of knowing—save herself. She alone had power to solve the doubts that troubled and beset him; she alone could be the one supreme and final answer to all the disquiet speculation of his soul.

XXXIII

THE Rector's dogcart drew up abruptly before the vicarage gate, and the lamps rocked as his energetic sixty years descended. "Keep the mare moving!" he admonished the groom, to whom he had flung the reins, and hastened up the weed-grown vicarage path, unwinding the scarf from his neck as he did so and loosening the upper buttons of his

overcoat. At first, fumbling for the bell-pull in the dark, and not finding it, he thumped impatiently upon the door with the hand that held the discarded driving glove; but almost at once, dissatisfied with this too muffled and ineffectual summons, he groped again, more vigorously, and found this time what he sought, and rang a violent peal upon the vicarage bell. The sound of its reiterated ringing had no terrors for him, as the sound of the rectory bell had had for his more humble colleague in the Lord. He stood, slashing his palm with the glove, as if he would rather have accentuated his claim upon attention than by any exercise of patience have sought to diminish it, and all the while his ungloved hand made spasmodic movements towards the bell-pull, that, for the slightest provocation of delay, it was prepared to seize again.

Within, the bell hiccuped against the passage wall, and from the threshold of the sitting-room the Vicar's voice called tentatively to the silence beyond, "Blanche. . . Harold. . . ." It was a survival of the habits of that bygone lawless day when the ringing of the front door bell caused every name within the house to cry upon the other, imputing and disputing obligation to the summons. And that the custom died hard was evinced by the voice of Harold from the kitchen-way beyond, demanding, "What's got Blanche?"

But, fortified by the belief that nobody of any consequence would ring the vicarage bell at this unlikely hour, he strode to the door in a temper to reprove any too presumptuous visitor who had without good justification chosen this time to disturb the household peace. No lamp burned in the hall, and in the darkness he could not distinguish the identity of the figure on the step beyond, but the voice that exploded in his face, demanding if the Vicar were at home, allowed him no room for doubt. He said "Oh!" and left the visitor upon the step and went back to the sitting-room, where the Vicar stood in an attitude of expectancy. "Father . . . Mr. Picherley wants to see you." With which, angry at the encounter and his own mishandling

of it, he vanished kitchenward, muttering imprecations on the house and all and sundry as he went.

The announcement of so august a visitor as the Rector of Mersham bestirred the Vicar's worst qualities of apology and effusiveness. He could have faced his Maker with more self-possession and native dignity than he could this remote connection by marriage with the Mersham acres. He shuffled out into unlit hall, full of expressions of concern.

"My dear sir. . . . My dear sir! I am so sorry. . . . Whatever was my son thinking of! He should have asked you in. Come in, I beg. I am afraid you cannot see. . . . Let me light a candle. Mind the umbrella stand to your right."

The Rector wasted no time on greetings and cut the Vicar's effusion short.

"It's all right, Bellwood," he said, in his peremptory and explosive voice. "I can see. Have you a room at liberty? I want a few words with you—alone." He closed upon his own entrance the door that the Vicar's son had left open, and rather pressed the Vicar than followed him as far as the sitting-room from which he had emerged.

"This will do," the Rector said, taking a look into it over the Vicar's shoulder. "This is all right. There's nobody in it?"

It was the room in which they chiefly lived; in which (save Blanche) they had their meals; where they had supped to-night. With its back to the hall wall, and its keyboard sideways to the window, stood the pianoforte of Blanche's fearful conflicts of the past; its desk folded out of sight behind the high bodice of fretwork and fluted silk, its lid closed over the discolored and unequal keys. The furniture was the nondescript Victorian of her mother's days; mahogany made mournful with black horsehair, and enlivened with antimacassars of colored wools—whose effect was as that of cheerful topics introduced to relieve the darkness of a funeral. A bronze lamp, subdued by a shade of perforated cardboard, stood upon the table, and beneath this on the side nearest to the fire lay the

open book that the Vicar had been reading, with the armchair drawn up to it. For all these things the Vicar in his profuseness apologized: for the carpet slippers in which he stood (confering ease upon his feet after a long parochial round); for the lamp, from which his obsequious fingers sought to coax a more appropriate flame in honor of this important guest; for the fire, which his abstraction had suffered to burn down, and which he was preparing to replenish from the coal-box when the Rector stopped him.

"Not on my account, Bellwood. No." He negated the suggestion of a chair that the Vicar tendered. "I won't sit down. I didn't come for that. I came . . ." He took two steps backward and reassured himself with a flat hand that the door was shut. ". . . You've heard about poor Leonard D'Alroy, of course."

The Vicar said: "Yes. That is . . . no. Not apart from . . . He had heard nothing."

"Not heard?" The Rector's face assumed a look of pained and protesting incredulity, as if his host had professed ignorance of Deuteronomy or the Book of Job. "Surely, man! Everybody's heard. Not heard! Why, I was even asked in Hunmouth how young Mr. D'Alroy was going on! You don't mean . . . We prayed for him in church last Sunday."

Thoughts, swift and terrible thoughts, that by rights should never have suggested themselves to any Christian being, least of all to an ordained and reverend minister of God, swept into the Vicar's mind; but his lips, concealed behind the tangled beard, subscribed by rote to the formula expected of him.

"So serious as that? My dear sir! . . . I am indeed sorry to hear it."

Who was there, the Rector demanded with the fervor of sincerity, who would *not* be sorry? On all hands, everywhere, he was touched by the expression of public sympathy and concern. During the comparatively short period of his stay

at Mersham his old friend's son had made himself beloved and respected by all; by rich and poor alike. The first word his groom had said to him this evening when he met him at the Mersham railway station was, "How is he, sir?" The people seemed unable to think of anything else. He was their one topic. Their sympathies and anxieties were wrapped up in him.

He had come up from London that very day, where he had been since Monday. Edward D'Alroy was there of course. Terribly cut up; terribly cut up. He never saw a man so altered. Leonard's temperature was 103 last night, and they had a hard struggle to reduce it in the morning. Their great anxiety was for the boy's heart. The doctors had intimated plainly their doubt whether it could stand the strain. The finest and most expensive doctors in England; three of them in constant attendance—Sir Heriot May and Sadler Crombie and Leicester Wilkins. And the best nursing that money could buy. He had been in conversation with Sir Heriot that very morning before leaving town. Even if the heart held good—and that is what they chiefly doubted—there was the fear of hæmorrhage or perforation or pneumonia. What an awful curse this typhoid was! Could nothing be done? Was medical skill entirely exhausted? When such enormous fees were in question, was it impossible to devise *no* treatment?

It was plain to see the powerful impression that the case had made upon him, the troubled emotions under which he labored, for he paced to and fro within the restricted limits of the Vicar's room, drawing the driving gloves through his clenched hand and biting his lip with the intensity of impotent concern. Tears rose to his eyes. He made no effort to conceal them. He knocked them from his lashes with his knuckles and admitted the weakness almost proudly, saying: "There! You see how it's touched me, Bellwood. If he'd been my own I couldn't have felt it more. . . . I loved the boy. Who didn't that ever knew him? He was a D'Alroy and a gentleman to the back-

bone. And now . . . To think of it! It's terrible; terrible. Were there no other fellows, with nothing dependent on them, who could have been spared better?"

To such distress the Vicar, still vaguely wondering in mind, offered the pabulum of a respectful and suffering silence. Comfort of the common sort, administered to poor parishioners—comfort of the giving and taking and knoweth best dispensation—was plainly inappropriate and inapplicable here. To the One above that never failed—and yet, in his own daughter's case had failed so signally—he raised no voice or finger of reverent memorial. He sighed. He said, "Ah!" He shook his head. "Grievous. Grievous!" And to himself he put the wondering question, "Why has he come to tell me this?" In some dim way he seemed to realize that this grief that struck the Rector was assumed to touch him, too, but to what precise extent or purpose he had no notion: only a hope—a feeble, flickering hope—that out of evil good might come, and peace emerge from suffering. And with a more commiserative and obsequious voice than heretofore he begged the Rector, "*Won't* you sit down?"

"No, no." The Rector put up a prohibitory hand against the chair, as if the chair had been the Devil. "I can't. I must not. . . . I have no time. I really came . . ." He relapsed at that into a sort of meditation, still pacing to and fro, and drawing his coupled gloves through his clenched fingers. ". . . I really came, Bellwood . . . I must be brief with you. Time presses. This is no occasion for long words." He drew up to the table end with his hands and gloves upon it, and said: "You will remember our speaking together some weeks ago . . . on a matter in reference to your daughter." He did not wait for any formal answer from the Vicar, but took his cough and the inclination of his head as a sufficient acknowledgment. "Your daughter made a certain charge." He corrected the word: ". . . A certain statement. At that particular time, I regret to say, I saw occasion to discredit it." He added

rapidly: "I don't blame myself for that. Indeed, if the circumstances were to repeat themselves . . . I should do it again. In my particular position towards the D'Alroys of Mersham. I don't see how I could conscientiously have done otherwise. Such a statement, when it involves such great, such serious consequences, must by the very nature of things be viewed with extreme caution and reserve. As I have said, my position of responsibility compelled me to discredit your daughter's statement, and similar reasons . . . similar reasons compelled my old friend Edward D'Alroy's son to take the same course. . . . But circumstances have sadly and terribly altered during the past few days. It is a matter of life and death. After some long and earnest consultations with his father, and after most careful reference to medical opinion . . . his father and I, we both deemed it advisable to reopen this painful subject, and put it to Leonard's never failing sense of honor. . . ."

Tears rose to his eyes again at that; tears of admiring remembrance.

"The moment he realized what grave issues hung upon his answer . . . the brave fellow never hesitated a moment. Even on that bed of sickness, truth and honor did not desert him. They are too deep in the D'Alroy blood. He admitted what perhaps few men placed in his position would have had the courage to confess: that his relations with your daughter . . . had been intimate enough to lend reasonable likelihood to her statement."

The Vicar, overcome with the momentary blindness of emotion, mumbled in his beard: "Thank God! Thank God!"

God had come back again, after this long absence. God was returned. The spiritual eye might with safety now be opened. Faith was to receive its vindication. It comforted him inexpressibly to reflect that, despite all, he had never really doubted. He might still live to see the revival of family prayer in his own home.

The Rector, taking the gloves up between both hands and

forcing them down upon the table with an action expressive of emphasis, looked the Vicar squarely in the face.

"On your word of honor, Bellwood—on your oath: is your daughter actually in the state you said she was?"

The question, launched in the Rector's hardest, most concentrated tones, shook all the Vicar's composure.

"My dear sir. . . . For anything I know to the contrary, she was . . . and still is."

"For anything you know to the contrary?" the Rector repeated, and his voice and eye were accusingly hard. "Do you mean . . . do you mean you actually came to me that night with no better evidence of the truth of your daughter's condition than that you knew nothing to the contrary? Didn't you submit her to some independent and unbiased opinion? Has no doctor seen her? . . . No?" His surprise at the Vicar's lack of ordinary precaution amounted almost to indignation. "Then how do you know she's in any particular condition at all? Perhaps she isn't. Perhaps she never has been. Perhaps all the time you've been hoping she wasn't."

He fixed the Vicar with an eye of challenge before which the Vicar's conscience quailed. There was truth in the charge. All this while, with that Christian shiftlessness that had been his course, he had suffered himself to hope that the trouble, insurmountable as at the time it seemed, would die away like the gathering thunder-storm that threatens but does not break. He had asked no questions. He had studiously kept his eye from resting too closely on his daughter lest, under its anxious gaze, the thing might grow. In the silence that lay between them he had striven to think it might eventually lose itself. In the evidence of her new resolve he had comforted himself in the belief that there was hope; a new awakening; a better life.

"What grounds have you to go on, Bellwood?" he heard the Rector ask him. "You told me your daughter was pregnant. Is she or isn't she? Everything hangs on that. If she isn't

... what am I doing here? What's brought me back from town? It's the crux of the whole business. Come! What have you got to say?"

For a time, indeed, singularly little. And then he began to discern many things to say; innumerable things to say. Things his folly had interpreted as hope, that spelled the blackest syllables of despair. The blood, long withheld from his brain, rushed back once more and made the pulses in his temple throb.

"There is no question . . ." he told the Rector, with the conviction of righteousness and wrath. "Her whole attitude toward me, toward her home, toward the world . . . goes to prove it. Since the day I called on you she has never once been out of doors. I cannot prevail on her . . . even for her health's sake. She will not suffer herself to be seen. She does not even take her meals with me. She is awfully . . . terribly altered. She has lost all interest in things around her. She has no pleasure in life. Would to God I might tell you otherwise."

His words, poured out of a troubled and fervid bosom, that agitated his beard and made his head to shake, appeared to weigh with the Rector at last.

"For the present . . . admitting that it is so," he said, "—and the point must be established without delay—I want to tell you, Bellwood, that Leonard D'Alroy is prepared to make your daughter full reparation. At once. Immediately. There is no time to be lost. . . ." Emotion seized hold of him once more, and he had to break off and stanch his eyes. "The poor fellow may die any day. I fear there is the least possible hope."

If the Rector had spoken in some foreign tongue with which the Vicar was but imperfectly acquainted, the sense of his words could not have sunk more vaguely into the listener's intelligence. He echoed, "Reparation?" in a faltering and uncertain voice, as though, even by repetition, he could come no nearer to the meaning of it. "Do I understand . . .?"

"... He would marry her?" the Rector added, completing the sentence with his own more expeditious words. "Yes... he would do That. He is ready to do That. Poor fellow. ... Poor dear fellow. Not a single thought of self or selfish interest. Only one thought sustains him: his duty toward Mersham and his fellow-men. If anything happens to him now... what will happen to Mersham and the country? You know that Edward D'Alroy's wife is a confirmed invalid. No further family is to be looked for from that quarter. He is an only son. The whole case is incredibly sad. If he dies without issue the estate will fall into litigation again as sure as eggs. Nothing will be left of it. The lawyers will get it all. They've had nearly half of it already.

"... Of course, if his health had been spared, he would have hoped to do infinitely more for Mersham than is possible now. He would have hoped by marriage to free the estate from all encumbrance and place it once more upon an assured financial footing. As it is... that is out of the question. Probably... in all probability, I grieve to say... he will never live to see the fruit of his devotion and self-sacrifice. I dare not doubt what the doctors tell us. The word of a physician like Sir Heriot May commands respect. Whatever happens... your daughter will be suitably looked after.... And even if the worst comes to the worst, and it isn't a son... which we shall have to face and bear like men, you may rest assured that Mr. D'Alroy will make her an appropriate allowance."

Rapidly, now standing at the table end, now pacing to and fro, and perpetually toying with his gloves, he expounded the D'Alroy plan; the last desperate casting of the D'Alroy dice for the perpetuation of its name and tenure of the ill-starred Mersham acres. That the Vicar's daughter counted for anything in the project, he displayed not the least conception. She was but a pawn, a cipher. In her, fortuitously—almost providentially, as it seemed—the D'Alroy seed, made priceless by the prospect of extinction, had found a fertile soil and germinated;

and all the fortune of the D'Alroy house hung trembling on this fruition of her womb. For the peace of her tormented soul and the tranquillity of her care-wracked body no effort had been expended. So long as the stock of D'Alroy seed held out in health and promise, this solitary and prospective stray might be suffered without concern to run wild and waste, and take its chance in conflict with the common, nameless stock. But now her body was become the garden of the D'Alroy hopes, and that which grew in it must be nurtured and cultivated with scrupulous care. So high a destiny made all resistance of it, in the Rector's mind, unthinkable. All he comprehended was that time pressed; that every moment involved a threat to the preservation of the D'Alroy house. He said to the Vicar:

"Well. . . . So you understand. Tomorrow morning by the first train I must return to London. I have promised D'Alroy to do so. Your daughter had better follow in the course of the morning. You'll accompany her, of course. Stop. . . . It would be better if I see her before I leave. This is a matter in which one must risk no misunderstanding. Where is she? Will you let her know, Bellwood? You can just explain what I've told you, first . . . if you like. It will make things easier. No, no. I won't sit down. I must keep on the move. I can't rest."

XXXIV.

TO the Vicar, all that he saw and heard assumed once again the bewildering air of unreality that had cloaked Trouble so monstrously when first it came upon him. His daughter marry the dying son of the Squire of Mersham? Surely, it was impossible; the distorted recollection of some story once perused in youth. Yet he obeyed the Rector's order by a mechanical subscription to the social authority of his

guest, and went forth dazed and speculating into the darkened hall. The figure of his son, against which he cannonaded at the entrance to the kitchen passage, whither Harold had hastily retreated from a point considerably nearer the sitting-room door, startled him into a vivid consciousness of self.

"Look out . . ." his son admonished him in a smothered voice of warning, "I'm here."

"You startled me. . . . Where's Blanche?"

"What's he come about?" his son demanded. Both of them spoke in whispers, like burglars confabulating in a strange house.

The Vicar pushed him back toward the kitchen with an urgent hand. "I have not time. . . . I cannot stop to explain. Where is your sister?"

Defrauded of the explanation to which his curiosity, stimulated by what it had already heard through the woodwork of the sitting-room door, deemed itself entitled, Harold relapsed into a state of aggrievement. "How should *I* know where she is. She's not in the kitchen. What on earth did you send me to the door for? It's not my business to go to the door. I didn't want to see *him*. I wouldn't have gone if I'd known."

The Vicar cast a troubled glance into the empty kitchen, lit by its smaller lamp, that would under ordinary conditions have held his daughter. "Is she upstairs? Has Blanche gone to bed? Make haste. Go and see, Harold. There is no time to lose."

Expressing by muttered word and appropriate action that such work constituted by no means part of his business, Harold moved sulkily on his errand. Blanche ought to have been in the kitchen when she was wanted. She ought to have been ready to answer the bell—it was a girl's task, not a fellow's. It wasn't for him to run about after Blanche every time she wasn't where she ought to be. He returned shortly, with resentment more pronounced upon his face and lips. His journey had been fruitless. "Blanche isn't there."

"Isn't there!" his father protested, to whom every moment of his son's time had seemed a century made terrible by the knowledge of the august presence kept waiting behind the sitting-room door. "Not there? She *must* be there."

"She *isn't* there," his son reiterated. "I've looked. Go and look for yourself if you don't believe me."

"Looked . . ." the Vicar echoed feebly. "Where have you looked? Surely . . . in her bedroom. . . ."

"I've looked all over that, and felt of her bed, and behind the door. And she isn't in my room, and she isn't in yours."

The Vicar said: "But this is terrible. This is terrible! At this time, of all times. Where can she be?" He slipped his agitated way to the scullery door, and put his head into the darkness beyond: "Blanche . . . Blanche . . ." and opened the kitchen door, through which the carrier's wife had come and gone, and called in smothered urgency to the outer darkness: "Blanche . . . Blanche . . ." but no voice answered. His beard, when he withdrew it at last and turned toward his son, seemed shapeless with anxiety and concern.

"What will he think! What *will* he think! What am I to say! Wherever can she be? I must go back to him. I can't keep him waiting. How must I account for this?"

His son's earlier resentment merged once more in the greater curiosity awakened by his sister's disappearance and the Vicar's distraction. He said: "Look here, father. What's it all about? What's he come for? What's he want with Blanche? I can't help you without I know. I've a right to know. I'm her brother. I shall *have* to know."

In the weakness of his extremity the Vicar did not dispute the right, or argue it further. Breathing as though from violent exertion, and with spasmodic brevity, he told his son the object of the Rector's call. "He's there, waiting. . . . What's to be done? What's to be done!"

The first thing to be done, in Harold's estimation, was to imprecate his sister, which forthwith he proceeded to do. The

next was to seek her with all haste, and as much indignation as possible. He ran out angrily into the darkness of the garden, whilst his father listened with anxious profile from the threshold of the kitchen to his subdued but peremptory invocations. "Blanche . . . Blanche! Do you hear! Blanche!" Into the hen-house, the stick-house, the toolshed he thrust his head, but no Blanche answered to the wrath that called upon her. He came back to the kitchen where his father stood awaiting him. "She's not there. What's she doing? Where's she got to?"

From within they heard a door open; a voice, the Rector's voice, grown impatient of silence and delay, uttered an interrogative ". . . Bellwood?"

The Vicar's face that turned toward this new and imminent source of alarm expressed blank horror.

". . . He'll be coming here. . . . What must I tell him? How must I explain it? My God! Of all times."

"Tell him . . ."—his son Harold was infinitely more resourceful than his father, having no principles, Christian or pagan, to consider—"tell him she's gone to bed. Say she's asleep. Say she's not been very well. You don't want to wake her. Go on! You'll have to. You've got to say something."

His father protested: "Asleep? In bed? . . . But that would be untrue. It would be a downright falsehood."

The name "Bellwood!" more peremptorily uttered, brought protestation to an untimely end. He threw up his hands with a gesture of despair and slipped back to the hall, where, silhouetted against the lamplight from the sitting-room, and framed within the doorway, the Rector stood.

". . . My dear sir. . . . I am so sorry. I regret most deeply. Pray forgive this long delay."

The Rector, ignoring apologies, came uncompromisingly to the plain issue. "Well? You've seen her? Is she there? Are you bringing her?" She might have been a heifer by the summary method of his allusion.

Unfortunately . . . no. He had not seen her. His daughter . . . he had not ventured to disturb her . . . was in bed.

"In bed!" The Rector, leading the way back into the room again, spun round upon his host with a look of blank amazement. "Good God, man! Is this a time to talk about bed—with Leonard D'Alroy at the point of death? What are you thinking of? Here I've traveled all the way down from London today, and driven over to see you on a subject like this, after the merest bite at home . . . and you tell me calmly your daughter is in bed. Is the matter of no more consequence to you than that? In bed! I don't care where she is. Wake her up. The sooner the better. She must be told at once."

The Vicar, writhing in impotent despair, began: "My dear sir . . ."

"Wake her up!" the Rector interrupted peremptorily. "Wake her up at once. Do you expect me to pace about your sitting-room all night? Good God, man, don't you understand the state I'm in? Have you no mercy for my feelings?"

"I beg you . . . let me explain . . ." the Vicar urged upon him with desperate insistence. "My daughter is unwell. She has been unwell all day. She has been unwell for many days. Her health has occasioned me the gravest concern. I hesitate to break her rest."

"Unwell! Your daughter is unwell—and Leonard D'Alroy is virtually dying. For all I know . . . he may be even dead by now. You put mere indisposition before an illness such as his! You consider a few moments of your daughter's sleep before the vital interests of Mer sham? It's rank madness. You don't know what you're talking about, Bellwood. This is a matter of honor and principle; not a matter of feeling. Do you think Leonard D'Alroy's father cares less for his son than you do for your daughter? Yet he does not hesitate to disturb the peace of his son's sickbed, and you show preposterous scruples about disturbing your daughter's sleep. Good gracious, man! . . ."

"Under ordinary circumstances . . ." the Vicar faltered, striving vainly for some refuge from this terrible position, "I should not have hesitated. But, my dear sir . . . I beg you to make allowances . . . for me as well as her. Think, my dear sir, her sex . . . her condition. . . ."

"Her condition?" The Rector threw his driving gloves contemptuously on the table. "Why! You know as well as I know that but for her condition, as you call it, I shouldn't be here now. But for her condition you'd never have driven to Mersham to see me. But for her condition we should none of us have had the least inkling of what she's been up to. You beset me with appeals to do my utmost to save your daughter's name and character, and when I've raised heaven and earth on your behalf, and been in the train all day, with scarcely a bite since breakfast, you put me off with her 'condition,' as if I'd come to ask a favor of you. A favor! Good God, man! I declare, if a strong sense of principle and honor didn't restrain me . . . I declare I'd put on my hat and clear out of your house at once, and let you whistle for your daughter's honor and character if this is all you think about them." He put up his hand against the further protestations he saw behind the Vicar's beard. "I tell you I won't listen to you, Bellwood. Once and for all, wake her up. Prepare her for tomorrow. You will have to take her to town. If there's the least doubt about it . . . she can be examined by a doctor there."

Silenced by the Rector's imperative lips and ordering hand, the Vicar, at an end for subterfuge, went vaguely from the room once more, and once more his son retreated before him to the kitchen, asking: "Well? What's he say? What have you come for?"

"Has Blanche come back?"

"What do you think? Of course she hasn't."

The Vicar let his hands fall to his side in token of impotent extremity. "He wants to see her. . . . He insists on seeing her."

"Well, he *can't* see her," his son decided. "Why didn't you tell him straight? What did you let him kid you about for? I heard you jawing."

"It's terrible . . . terrible! What have I done to deserve to be put in a situation like this! Have you been upstairs? Have you called again?"

"I've been all over. I've been as far as the front gate. I couldn't go farther. The damned trap's out there. I'd forgotten all about that. The fellow must have heard me calling." He clenched his teeth. "The little fool! What's she want to go and do a thing like this for?"

The Vicar, with an apprehensive ear towards the passage, said: "I cannot stay. . . . I must go back. I must do something. He will be calling out again in a moment. He is terribly impatient and upset. What *are* we to do! What *are* we to do!" He wrung his hands.

"Look here," his son admonished him. "You know jolly well you can't tell him Blanche's out. If you told him that it would be all UP. He'd say, 'What! Out at this time of night?' and he'd ask 'Where?' and 'Who with?' and you couldn't tell him. And he'd say it was all a plant, and they'd been had." His indignation grew rebukeful. "If only you'd said straight out she'd gone away, when first he asked for her! This wouldn't have happened. What did you want to go and tell him she was in, for? You ought to have said she was staying with friends in Hunmouth for the night. I should, if I'd been you."

"But what am I to say now?" his father besought him. ". . . What's that? Is he coming out? I must go back. It's awful. He'll begin to suspect something. What a position! What a position to be placed in!"

"You've got to go back and tell him you've seen Blanche," his son counseled him. "Do you hear? You've got to go back and say you've seen her. And she's very much upset. It's put her in an awful state. You've got to rub it in, do you

hear? It's put her in an awful state. She's carrying on something fearful. Chronic, you've got to say. And you can't do anything more now. You'll have to wait while she calms down. Do you hear? Are you listening? While she calms . . ."

A sound from the direction of the sitting-room caused both their heads to turn. His son pushed the Vicar hastily towards the passage. "Hurry up. Go on with you. You know what to say. I've told you. Don't let him come down here. And don't forget I shall be listening outside."

This time the Rector had not left the room, but paced to and fro between the door and the now fireless grate with determined folded arms. At the first sound of the Vicar's return he stopped in his pacing and confronted him. "Well?"

The Vicar, flushed and troubled, said in a low voice, ". . . I have seen my daughter."

"You have told her?"

"Yes."

"Is she coming down?"

". . . I fear not."

"Why not?"

"Because . . . because . . . it has upset her a great deal."

He drew forth the handkerchief, almost forgotten in the Rector's presence, and blew a note of unutterable distress.

The Rector, fixing him with an eye of speculation, said, "Oh! . . ." For a few tense moments nothing was added, by way of words, on either side. "You explained the position of affairs? She knows what is expected of her?" the Rector asked, and the Vicar bowed his head submissively. "I should have been better satisfied to see her," he added. "It would have been far more satisfactory . . . to me. Much more satisfactory." He clung dangerously to the idea.

"She is in no state to be seen . . ." the Vicar urged upon him. "I beg you . . . my dear sir! The sudden news has quite overcome her. Her distress is . . ." he put the hand-

kerchief to his nose once more and blew the word rather than uttered it—" . . . pitiable!"

"Very good!" The Rector, freeing himself energetically from the state of irresolute meditation in which he seemed disposed to linger, picked up his gloves from the table with an air of reluctant finality. "Then I suppose we must leave it at that. I must be satisfied with your word, Bellwood." He drew on one glove, and regarded the other with an eye that seemed to see small satisfaction in it. "I must confess . . . it's a poor return for all my labor. Didn't she say anything? What? No?" He drew on the second glove and immediately removed the first, the better to button his coat. "I tell you what I shall do, Bellwood. There's nothing else for it. I shall have to drive over again to see you in the morning. I can't leave things quite like this. D'Alroy wouldn't understand it. He'd consider it most unsatisfactory and inconclusive." He fastened the last button and put on the glove again. "Look here. Now you thoroughly understand. You must be up early tomorrow, both you and your daughter. Have everything ready for your journey. Take sufficient with you for a week, at least."

"A week? . . . But, my dear sir! Think. Sunday. . . . My Lenten week-night services. . . ."

The Rector cried intolerantly: "Oh, bother those! What about mine? This is no time to think about trifles, Bellwood. You can come home again for Sunday, if you like. As for the other services, let 'em go, or arrange with somebody else to take them. There are a lot of chaps. . . . You're sure it's no use my seeing your daughter? Half-past twelve! Good gracious! I wonder how poor Leonard D'Alroy's coming on. This will be a bad time with him. I daren't think of it. I dread the morning, and the news it may bring." He grew retrospective once more, and his eye moistened. He recalled the Mersham Show and the marked effect that the son of Edward D'Alroy had produced upon an admiring tenantry.

Not one dissentient voice; not one jarring or unpleasant note. "Poor fellow! Poor dear fellow!" On the threshold of the room, between the lamplight (already growing dim, and giving tokens of imminent extinction) and the darkness of the hall, his soul delivered itself of something that was not unlike a prayer. "Pray to goodness he may be spared! He is too promising a life to lose."

And so, with a little more after this manner, he took his leave, and strode down the weed-grown path and out by the gate, and sprang into the trap that quickened its pace along the road to meet him, and snatched the reins from the groom's hands, and spanked back to Mersham past the sleep-sealed hearing of the carrier's wife. And the Vicar, left standing respectfully on the doorstep in his carpet slippers until his deference knew the Rector to be really gone, stared out, from the commotion of a mind in turmoil, upon the dark lineaments of a peaceless and portentous world.

XXXV

EXCEPT in the daytime Fondie Bassiemoor was not a dreamer by nature. He either slept (that is) or lay awake; and if his night's rest were not sacrificed to thinking, it was rarely disturbed by dreams. For the most part he had the blessed faculty of slumber, slipping into sleep as easily as did his body between the sheets; and when he woke at length, it was with no greater effort or difficulty. But this night his sleep was vexed. He even said things in it (or so it seemed) and awoke at the sound of his own voice, and turned tormentedly upon his bed. And last of all he dreamed a strange and vivid dream.

He dreamed that he was seated at the organ in church, and the young gentleman was with him. He saw the keys, and on each side of those the stops; and the music on the desk; and

the empty pews beyond; and the pillars; and the windows all around; and the loft beneath the tower where the deserted organ was. And all these things he saw as plain as plain; as plain as ever he perceived them on a Sunday, and infinitely plainer; for now he perceived them with a vividness that made them almost heartrending, and lent them a significance greater than had ever attached to them before.

What had been the subject of his conversation with the young gentleman he was unsure; but it must have been Blanche, for Blanche was in his mind, and the young gentleman fixed upon him a long and melancholy, reproachful look as if to ask the old, old question: "Did you . . .?" and Fondie hung his head as though to give the old, old answer: Why no, he hadn't, sir! And all at once the church, that had been bright before with the sunlit patterns of the windows traced across its pews and aisles and pillars, grew (of a great sudden) dark as death; and he and the young gentleman gazed together at the blackness that had been but a moment ago sunbeams and bright glass. And a sort of horror crept into their eyes and hearts. For they knew it was a storm; and in dreams a storm is a very dreadful, fearful thing. Even as they gazed, they heard the raindrops rattle like artillery against the windows and on the roof. And Blanche was out in it. Blanche was somewhere out in it. That thought stabbed through his bosom like a knife. "We can't leave her!" the young gentleman cried; and Fondie answered, "No, sir, we must go and seek her!" And he arose from the organ seat in an agony of impotent concern, for he knew not where she was, nor where she might be, nor how to reach her. Again the fusillade of raindrops struck the window, and yet again. And with all his anguished soul in his eyes, he awoke with the sheer intensity of looking; and lo! the church shrank down to the dimensions of his little bedroom at the back of the house, above the scullery roof; and the organ dwindled to his bedstead; and the window upon which the young gentleman and he had fixed such anguished eyes diminished to

the four-paned window at the foot of his own bed; and the raindrops had been pebbles—for his awakened consciousness was quick enough to hear the last of them rebound upon the roof below, and rattle down the tiles to the yard whence they had been gathered. The dream and its reaction had thrown his brow and body in a sweat, and the poignant realism of its visionary alarm was still imprinted on his memory as he struggled out of bed. Pebbles against the window-pane are, in the country, a traditional announcement of urgency and distress. He undid the screw, slid open the little window and drew aside the curtain, and put out his head and peered below.

"Aye?"

"Is that you, Fondie Bassiemoor?"

In the darkness already graying towards dawn, he made out a figure in the yard below, with its face turned up to him, that more by reason of the voice proceeding from it he recognized after a moment for Blanche's brother.

"Aye, it's me, sir. Is there anything I can . . ."

"Have you seen Blanche?"

"Why, let me think, sir. It would be . . ."

"But tonight, I mean. I mean last night. It's morning now, of course. Have you seen anything of her since tea-time?"

"Not since then, I haven't, sir." The remnant of his dream's reality seemed to solidify about his bosom and become actual and solid, with a weight of lead. "Is she . . . is she missing, sir?"

The voice below replied with a noticeable shake in it: "We can't find her anywhere. She's not at home."

"If you'll nobbut wait o' me a minute, sir," Fondie said, "I'll come down to you."

"We can't find her anywhere. She's not at home."

The words rang through him like a knell, and went on ringing all the while as with desperate haste he flung himself into his clothes, or into such sufficiency of them as would serve his

purpose. But a few minutes had passed before the sound of bolts, cautiously withdrawn, preceded his appearance at the kitchen door. He was already booted but collarless, with his coat collar turned up about his bare neck. "I'm sorry to ha' kept you waiting, sir," he said.

By the gray light of the growing dawn the gray face of Blanche's brother bore a very different expression from the expression it had borne last night, and his voice a very different sound. Time, and the futility of vain searching, had told upon him. Apprehension, like the monster that it is, had devoured already many of those lesser moods and passions that take their toll of petty prey. Vexation had been swallowed by concern. Since the first small hour he had ceased to imprecate his sister. The last time he had muttered oath against her was when he stood in angry expectation outside the vicarage gate, his wrath in readiness to greet the returning figure that every instant seemed as if it must reveal to view. But now, before the gravity of her protracted absence, all personal wrath was hushed and silenced. His face and voice and bearing betrayed a concern purged of any insensate anger. "We've been looking for her everywhere," he told Fondie; "the guv'nor and I. Not that the guv'nor's much good. He's too bowled over. She's not at home; that's flat. I've been twice all round Whivvle. I've been part up the Mersham Road. She wasn't there. I've been a good mile or more to Merensea. She's not there either." He pushed back his hat from his brow and passed his hand over it, and blew out his cheeks with a manifestation of extremity and fatigue. "We thought perhaps you might have seen her. I'm about done up."

"Was she . . . when was she last at home, sir, do you say?" Fondie asked in a low and troubled voice.

"She was there at supper-time. I hadn't got back then. I'd been away somewhere," he explained hurriedly. "But the guv'nor was there all right, and so was she. He said she set the things the same as she always does, and cleared them away

again after he'd done supper. I'd just got back and gone into the kitchen, expecting she'd be there—I wanted something to eat—when old Picherley called . . .”

“Old who, sir?” Fondie inquired.

“Old Picherley—from Mersham. *You* know.” He paused for a moment in swift calculation as to how much prudence might confide. “Look here . . .” he told the wheelwright’s son, “I know we can trust *you*. You know a lot already, and I know the guv’nor tells you things. Old Picherley came to see the guv’nor about—about *you* know; about Blanche’s marriage.”

“Her marriage, sir?” Fondie echoed blankly.

“I know there’s been a lot of talk about the business,” her brother continued. “There’s been a jolly sight too much of it. I should have stopped some of it if I’d been the guv’nor. Jolly quick. As a matter of fact, Blanche is to marry young D’Alroy. It’s always been understood.” He was rehearsing upon Fondie Bassiemoor the version of this episode which his judgment had decided was the one most expedient to be made public. Without feeling under the necessity to enlighten Fondie on the critical condition of the heir of Mersham that had brought this vital change about, he alluded casually to the projected marriage as to a long accepted thing. “But for young D’Alroy’s illness they’d have been married before. Blanche has known from the first. We all have. But we didn’t want it talking about by everybody. It had to be kept a bit quiet for a time. There were reasons. . . . Now things have changed. Everything’s settled. They want Blanche to be married as soon as the guv’nor’ll consent. He’s a bit thick, the guv’nor, when he gets his back up. He says the notice is too short. They haven’t been engaged long enough. He disapproves of such rushed-up marriages; he wants to know more about young D’Alroy first. Old Picherley hadn’t half a time with him tonight. You know what the guv’nor can be like. But I expect he’ll give way all right in the end. . . .”

In which manner, reconciling himself to the authenticity of these revised facts by the process of narration, and gathering assurance from the reasonable semblance of them as uttered by his own voice, he recompensed himself to some extent for the anxieties previously expended.

But to Fondie Bassiemoor, with one hand holding the up-turned collar about his neck, while the lips above it subscribed from time to time a respectful "Yes, sir," or "Indeed, sir," this new light upon an old sorrow made all his conscience shrink. She was to marry the young Squire of Mersham? He, Fondie Bassiemoor, the wheelwright's son, had had the audacity to seek to substitute his own wicked and unworthy self into the sacred place that one, and one alone, could rightly fill. Thank God his mischievous project had miscarried! Thank God he had been hindered from doing that which, with but a little more persuasion, he had the daring to believe he might have done; which, no later than a few mere hours ago, he had upbraided himself most bitterly for the default to do! What answer then could he have made to her, to his own conscience, to God and all the world? What reparation for the wrong his selfishness and treachery had wrought?

And it was to him, to him of all men, that her brother turned in this moment of anxiety. It was to him her brother told what Fondie's unsuspecting nature accepted without question for the truth. He did not know that this same brother had at first openly resented the Vicar's suggestion of recourse to Fondie Bassiemoor, saying: "Why should I go to *him*? What's *he* got to do with it? You're a jolly sight too thick with him as it is, and so was Blanche." No, he did not know that. All the blood in his body seemed to turn against him and rush accusingly to his brain. For one moment he had the impulse to exclaim: "I doubt you do wrong to confide i' me, sir. I'm last man that deserves anybody's confidence, least of all yours. I've sinned greatly against you and yours, in heart." But the impulse, strong though it was, was matched and mastered by

the inherent hypocrisy within him. He made the specious compromise with conscience that is the grave of all good resolutions, all good deeds. Conscience should keep silence and compound the sin in him; but henceforth conscience should be his guide. He had erred against them, but to the best of the power within him would he now atone. He would help them. He would seek with them. Like a giant would he shoulder their anxieties and make their cares his own. Whom they sought should be found. But where?

It was her brother who supplied the helpless question. "And look here . . ." he warned the wheelwright's son. ". . . You know, it's jolly awkward. We don't want this talking about. We don't want the business to get all over the shop, and back to Mersham, to old Picherley's ears. We can't go asking everybody straight out if they've seen Blanche." Now that the first pride of communicating his sister's ample rehabilitation before the world to Fondie's ears had passed away, the old concern—temporarily lost sight of—came back with the old force. He asked: "What on earth is she up to? What on earth's made her kid us all about like this? She was all right at breakfast when I left home. I can't think what's come over her. Look here, Fondie. Do *you* know of anything that might give us a hint? Do you know of any place she'd be likely to go to?"

The only thing that Fondie knew was locked up in his guilty bosom. The only place she was (in his experience) in the least prone to frequent was the old house. At such a crucial time as this even hypocrisy had no alternative but to tell the truth.

"Miss Blanche has been to aud hoose a time or two, sir," he said.

"The old house!" The words were expressive of complete surprise. And then, as though remembrance had come to the rescue of astonishment: "Oh, I know! But that's ever so long ago. It's over a year."

"I mean lately, sir," Fondie corrected him. "I've seen her

stood outside gate when I've been coming away, last thing."

"You've seen her! What! You don't mean at night?"

"It would be at night, sir," Fondie answered.

"But what on earth for! What on earth took her there? I never knew she'd been anywhere. I didn't think she ever left home."

"It was maybe only for a walk, sir," Fondie explained. "I understood her to tell me she found it bad to bide in doors all day. I may have been mistaken, sir."

Her brother exclaimed: "That's the worst of Blanche. She's so close. You can't get anything out of her. If only she'd been open, this might never have happened. It couldn't. We should have taken jolly good care to stop her going out like that. She'd no right going out. Why didn't you tell father?"

"Maybe I ought to have done, sir," Fondie confessed, with a contrition inclusive of larger faults than this they spoke of. "I'm to blame, I dare say, sir, in many ways. I'm a good deal to blame."

All the while they had not stood still. At the first mention of the old house they had, with mutual impulse, moved in its direction, leaving the wheelwright's yard behind them, and walking with a swift and urgent step through the main street, in whose upper windows the nocturnal lights—with which so many rural sleepers defraud darkness of its terrors and make this artificial substitute for an easy conscience—still burned here and there. Day was breaking fast. Overhead a level layer of gray and heavy cloud oppressed the housetops, seeming to touch the smokeless chimneys. No color yet had come to brick or tile, or grass or growing thing; but there were hints of hues in the changing values of the shadows of the lifeless world through which they walked. Rime was on the roofs, and the early morning air that stung their eyes and lungs was very keen. Far away, either on the waters of the Hun or out to sea, they heard the smothered siren of a steamer. But at the aud hoose gate—where not longer than a few brief hours ago

Fondie had hung upon his heel, hopelessly expectant of what so hopelessly they looked for now—was no vestige of the Blanche they sought. The mere sight of the gate, surmounted by the torpid trees, served to dispel what hopeless hopes they had. She was not there. She could not be there. It was impossible she should be there. Reason might have known it.

. . . And yet, where could she be? They made the circuit of the aud hoose walls; they whispered her name into the shrubberies and hedgerows; they stood on gate-bars of adjacent closes and called "Blanche!" and "Miss Blanche!" respectively into the gray vague beyond, without the least belief that any voice would answer.

"I doubt she isn't here, sir," Fondie said at last, telling the other no more than his conviction knew. "She'd have answered by now, I think, if she had 'a been."

"But where can she be?" her brother despairingly exclaimed. "What's made her go and do a thing like this?" Stress of concern caused him to be communicative and more candid to the wheelwright's son than but for this he would have been; for, truth to tell, he held small brief for Fondie Bassiemoor, whom in public he affected (for pride's sake) to regard as his father's organist and factotum—a fellow rather than a man. "Look here. I can't reckon it up. We had a few words the other night. Not *last* night. I had to speak straight to her. Since this business she's been a bit thick at times. Not often," he added magnanimously, "but now and then. And I've had to stock up to her for the gov'nor's sake. You know what he is. He's too indulgent and easygoing. . . . But it can't have been that. She was all right yesterday." He regretted, almost immediately, the excess of confidence imparted, and said: "Of course. Look here. You're not to go and speak about it. It's strictly private, what I've told you. I don't want all Whivle discussing our affairs."

Fondie gave the required undertaking with his customary readiness. "You can rely on me not naming it to anybody,

sir!" and they turned their backs disconsolately on the audience.

"Look here," the Vicar's son suggested, "what do you say if we go home and see what the gov'nor's doing. She might have come back. It's no good going on searching any longer if she has. What do you say? Shall we?"

Fondie, helpless in the hands of Destiny, and unable to suggest any alternative commended more by likelihood and reason, said: "We may as well, sir, as you say. We can't do a deal more good where we are, and I don't know where else likelier to turn to."

But their hopes, fanned into a frail expectancy, like some precarious flame, by the air of their rapid motion—as though such purposeful walking could not be altogether void of object—were dashed by the sight of the Vicar, slippered and forlorn, who emerged from the front door at the sound of their return, seeking of them the reassurance that they sought of him.

"Have you seen her?"

". . . Has she come back?"

No. . . . No. . . . On either side: No. She had not been seen. She had not come back. The Vicar, who in his distress had gazed upon the newcomer without the smallest sign of recognition, as if he had been absent or elsewhere, burst into tears, saying: "My daughter. . . . My daughter. Where are you? What have you done?" Behind him, on the hall-stand, the candle that replaced the extinct and oilless lamp tossed its sickly, pallid flame in the gray light. Awful thoughts; thoughts that he tried his utmost to resist; thoughts that he dared not utter, crept up to Fondie's brain out of the despairing helplessness that possessed him. They went the round of the dreary vicarage garden once again, responding to a sort of rote that bound them and made initiative its slave. And from the garden, when they had proved its shed and fowl-house, its stable and very dog-kennel, devoid of Blanche, they came back deepened in perplexity and despair; and rote sent Blanche's brother

through the vicarage again from top to bottom, with the same consideration that had sent him half a dozen times before. Perhaps (they argued) she had returned whilst they were elsewhere, and stolen to her bedroom unperceived. But the bedroom door yielded to her brother's hand; the hard light fell metallic on the creaseless quilt of a bed unoccupied.

"Not there?" her father murmured piteously at the foot of the staircase, where he and Fondie stood in grief together; and her brother answered with the unchangeable answer, "No. Not there."

And now the morning was upon them with all its difficulties and complications. Already the sky was broken. Red and gold suffused it in the east. From every quarter chanticleer proclaimed the day with his triumphant bugle. The birds were astir. Smoke began to rise from chimney after chimney. Soon all Whivvle would be awake. Yet where to look? Where to seek her? How to get her safely home again from the peril of these alien eyes and ears and tongues?

At Fondie's forlorn suggestion, he and Harold visited the church.

"The church!" Harold exclaimed, when Fondie mentioned it. "*That's* no good. It can't be. She'd never go there."

But his father clung to the suggestion, divining in it even something of the remote influence of the hand of God. Who knew—who could tell—*where*, under God's guidance, his daughter had been led? "Go, Harold . . . as Fondie asks you. Take the keys. It may be providential."

And so they went, taking the keys that Blanche had taken with her times innumerable; and searched among the reeling headstones and slanting ledgers; and let themselves into the sacred edifice. And all Fondie Bassiemoor's dream came back. Aye, it all came back—awfully, terribly back! There was the organ, there the pews beyond; the aisles, the pillars, the windows, the disused loft. To still the utterance of despair they searched assiduously, minutely. From the vestry to the very

tower, where she had led the young gentleman and so many others in her time, they searched; and from the tower they peered in all directions, east and west and north and south, as if they might have seen her; but more for occupation's sake, to keep their anxieties active. And she was not there. God had not led her to His house. God might have done. It would have been a simple thing for God to do, and a gracious thing, beside, towards the stricken father in his carpet slippers, with the forgotten candle flickering behind him in the vicarage hall. . . . But God had thought otherwise.

. . . . So they came back to her home again, saying, "Well?" to "Well?" and "No" to "No"; and the Vicar wept again with eyelids red as dawn with much watching and much weeping and infinite grief. On their road home they met a laboring man of Whivvle steering his way to Merensea on a crazy bicycle for a day's threshing, and all three stared at one another curiously, without a word. They stared so hard that the greeting which would of custom have passed between them was ground to nothing by their stony stares, like grain between millstones. Not till he had gone by did Fondie Bassiemoor suggest: "We might ha' thought to ask him if he'd heard tell. . . . He looked strange and hard. . . . Maybe he could ha' told us something."

And Harold decided: "If she's not home this time, by we get there, we shall have to do something. We can't keep it back. People will have to know. It's gone beyond a joke."

Till that time, with nothing in their knowledge to lead them, they had sedulously searched as if searching—only it were properly directed—might solve all and put an end to their anxieties. With resolute agreement they had forborne to hint at a darker thing behind their seeking. But now, with bodily weakness and the exhaustion of their hopes, barriers broke down. The Vicar, shaking like a child with sobs, said: "God knows what she may have done . . . what she may have been tempted to do!" And though his son retorted: "Oh, shut up, father!

She wouldn't be likely to do anything of that sort, anyhow. Why should she?"—there was no depth in his assurance, and his gray face looked at Fondie Bassiemoor, even in uttering it, as if he besought the wheelwright's son to make these sentiments his own, and strengthen them with the conviction that his own apprehensions lacked. But Fondie Bassiemoor's troubled face with its downcast eyes lent no hospitality to his hope; and all that Fondie Bassiemoor's lips uttered was a faltering "It's to be hoped not, sir."

A sudden alternative illuminated the drawn despondency of Harold's face.

"It can't be . . ." he said. "There couldn't be anybody else?" He looked at Fondie Bassiemoor with an incredulous and inquiring eye. "Do *you* know? I'm at business all day. I can't look after her, and see what she's up to. Is there any other fellow in this? Is there any other chap we don't know of?"

Fondie, smitten in his conscience once again, shook his head and answered: "Not that I've heard tell of, sir. I think not, I should doubt very much if there was."

". . . Any chap she hasn't told us about? She's as close as they make 'em, particularly these last few weeks. She never says a thing. Do you think she's gone off with anybody—with some other fellow, just for devilment?"

Fondie's staunchness murmured: "I think it's last thing she'd be like to do, sir. Not with anybody. There's nobody she's spoken to of a long while." In his ears those recent words of hers to him were ringing: "I shan't stand it, Fondie. I shall do something!" and all within his bosom was chill and cold. "I wish I could only think it was no worse than that, sir," he told her brother. "It's time we set other folk on seeking, beside ourselves. I doubt there's some reason why she hasn't come back. . . ." With that his voice broke huskily, and he turned his head.

"Look here, father!" his son said decisively, after that, "Fon-

die's right. We can't go kidding about any longer. It's gone too far. We shall have to own up. We shall have to . . ."—he hesitated at this supreme and bitter draught, but swallowed it—"we shall have to let the police into it. There's no help that I can see."

The Vicar threw up a shocked and protesting hand. "Tell the police! No, no, Harold. Your own sister? As if she was a common criminal? Haven't we suffered enough? You can't mean it. We can't do that with her. The place would cry shame on us."

"But the police will *have* to know," his son contended. "It's no use you thinking we can keep it from them. The moment we ask anybody if they've seen her everybody will learn she's missing. They'll want to know when, and how long. We shall have to make a clean breast of things. Whatever happens, we must try and get her home again before old Picherley comes. We can't kid him off a second time. He wouldn't have any of it."

"It is terrible . . . terrible." The Vicar subsided with that into the abandonment of a grief that sought no longer to impose its terms upon the world. "Blanche! . . . Blanche! . . ." He called her name feebly to the infinite. "Where are you? Answer your father. . . . You are breaking his heart."

"If I might venture to propose it," Fondie said, "I'll run straight home and get my bicycle, sir; and you get yours, same. I'll ask anybody I chance to meet if they've seen Miss Blanche anywhere, or if they've heard tell of her; and if they meet anybody else that has, to beg them to call at vicarage at once. And then I'll ride my bicycle as far as station, and inquire if Miss Blanche was there any time last night. After that I'll go round by way o' Mersham, and I'll ask there. Maybe you'll do same as far as Merensea, sir. . . . And if you care to call at policeman's and tell him trouble you're in, I don't think it would be amiss. . . . They can use telephone a deal quicker than

we can cycle, and if anything's been heard they're as likely to hear it as anybody. Hadn't we best blow yon candle out now, don't you think, sir?" But, before going, the solitude and desolation of Blanche's father made a last appeal to his heart. Minutes, now, were inconsequent beside the hours that had already passed. He said: "Old gentleman looks starved and cold, sir. Shall I just set a fire going for him i' sitting-room? Then, wi' kettle on hob and teapot on table, he can make himself some hot tea to sup while we're gone." His son returned; "Oh, no. Don't bother about that. He'll be all right—won't you, father?" and the Vicar said, "I think of nothing but my daughter. So long as *she* be safe; so long as she be safe . . ."—but Fondie had his way; a swift and comforting way; and the flames crackled through the kindling in the grate and licked the coals; and the Vicar subsided into the armchair with a groan of weariness and gratitude, and put his carpet slippers on the shabby hassock that Fondie Bassiemoor drew under them; and Fondie Bassiemoor said: "Fire'll go nicely now, I think, sir. Kettle's on hob, and teapot's just beside you on table, wi' cup and saucer." And Blanche's father, with the flames reflected in his tangled beard and his beard abjectly on his bosom, answered: "Thank you. . . . Thank you, my dear friend. You are very good. You are a great comfort."

XXXVI

THE Rector of Mersham had some of the qualities as well as the defects of the country gentleman. Like the late Sir Lancelot, he was no lie-abed. This morning he rose up betimes, for he had barely slept.

Breakfast at the rectory had been ordained for half-past seven, but earlier than that the Rector was fuming for it. At a quarter past he rang his study bell and, appearing like an apparition to the startled maid, on her hurried way to answer it, com-

manded her: "Let me have some coffee now. Never mind anything else. I must be going. . . . Are the letters here?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Bring the bag to me the moment it comes."

He had his coffee. The mail was late. He paced the breakfast-room, watch in hand. It was abominable. Why should the mail be late this morning, of all mornings in the year? Not until twenty minutes before eight did the flushed maid bring the post-bag to him. What! What! Had he wasted this time for nothing? No letter? Not even a card? He was amazed at D'Alroy. The distant kinswoman suggested a wire. True; quite true. It might be even then upon its way. In any case he could not wait. She was to open it if it should come. He took his leave of her gustily, breathing fervent hopes for the best.

Thus delayed, in spite of all his sleeplessness and preparation, it was close on eight o'clock when the dogcart reached Whivvle and bowled along the main street. Not even the abstraction he was in served to keep from the Rector's notice the fact of the considerable interest his entry excited. He could almost believe that people ran, in their eagerness to catch a glimpse of him; that curtains were pulled incontinently awry, and street doors opened to emit observant heads. He did not remember that such attention to his appearance was customary. It made him wonder. He began to ask if Bellwood's discretion were as defective as his feelings.

But when the dogcart swept round the corner to the vicarage gate suspicion blazed up into confirmatory anger. The man was a fool. Plainly he was unworthy of all confidence, the least trust. Here, clustering about the precincts of the vicarage, in attitudes of ill-feigned casualty or expectation undisguised, were villagers apparently attendant on some supreme event. Idle women were there, with children tugging at their skirts, who rocked babies on their bosoms or stood in tattle, their bare arms wrapped in their aprons from the sharp March morning

air. His indignation at the sight of them rose to the force of an expletive. "Damn the man!" he said inside. Had he no more sense than this? Except for the urgency of the business that brought him, his anger would not have tightened rein upon the road, but would have driven straightway back to Mer sham without a halt, and left this fool of a fellow to his own folly. As it was, he drew the mare up on her haunches, as a means of venting the impatience that possessed him, and strode through the gate and up the weedy pathway like a thunder-cloud in motion; drawing off his gloves as he had done so short a while before, and ringing the bell with a vehemence that showed he was in no temper for procrastination. And as no immediate answer acknowledged this first summons, he rang again, keeping his hand upon the bell-pull in readiness for any contingency. Let all whom it might concern know that the Rector of Mer sham and fifteenth cousin by marriage of the late Sir Lancelot stood without, and was not to be trifled with. But no third summons was required. The door opened simultaneously with the second and he found himself confronted by a curious individual, a stranger to him: a young man with a white face and red eyes, who looked at him without a word or any movement of the face or lips, and stood as if in this posture he might have stood forever, stupidly staring. The Rector clapped his driving gloves together and put one foot upon the step as an indication of his purpose to enter.

" . . . The Vicar at home?"

" . . . But of course the Vicar was at home. His words were independent of reply. He advanced into the hall, and the white-faced guardian of the door gave way. "Where is he? Tell him Mr. Picherley is here. What?" For the white-faced young man had seemed to murmur something—something dubious and hesitating; something that sounded like ". . . I doubt . . . Vicar won't be able to see you, sir . . . this morning." "Not see me?" He turned round upon the white-faced young man as if incredulous to hear himself so spoken to. "What do you

mean? . . . The Vicar has already arranged to see me. The Vicar is expecting me. Miss Blanche . . . his daughter. . . . What?"—and twice the young man tried to speak and could not.

" . . . Dead, sir," he said at last. With that he turned his red eyes suddenly aside and hid his face upon his forearm, whence for a few spasmodic moments the tears of his unmitigated weeping rolled desolately to the floor.

"Dead! . . . Miss Bellwood! The Vicar's daughter!" The voice was no longer a voice of stern rebuke, but a voice of stupefaction. "There must be some mistake. Good gracious, fellow! I was here only last night. Are you sure what you're talking about? When did she die?"

"Maybe she was dead then, sir," the smothered voice replied from behind the forearm. "She wasn't found while this morning."

"Found . . ." the Rector repeated. "What do you mean by 'found'? Wasn't she at home? Where was she found?"

" . . . In pond, sir," the voice replied. "Pond at back of vicarage. In paddock."

If the white-faced young man had been any other than Fondie Bassiemoor, the wheelwright's son, he might have thrown open the door and drawn the attention of the visitor's scepticism to the stairs. "Look, sir," he might have said. "That's wet that dripped from her when we took her up." But he did not. He merely stood as if submissive to the Rector's (and any other) will.

The Rector looked at the forearm; at the white face that after awhile reissued from it; at the hall ceiling; at the stairs; at the hat-stand; finally at the gloves in his hand—his gloves, his driving gloves, curiously emphatic and distinct. One of the thumbs (he noticed) was giving way at the stitches. To have uttered what was in his mind would have demanded an abler tongue than his, for many things were in his mind—of which, sad truth to tell, compassion was the last and least. All Mer-

sham blocked his pity. Only in substance did he stand beneath the Vicar's roof; only the material portions of him bowed to this sorrow that had befallen. In heart he was Mersham still, measuring this tragedy by the Mersham-D'Alroy perspective. Good Lord! What had the girl done? What had driven her to do a wicked, senseless act like this? To take her own life was one thing . . . but to take that other! To destroy, at one fell blow, the last hope of Mersham. What was he to say to D'Alroy now? It had been D'Alroy's hope and consolation; the one thing to sustain his spirit in its dark and sorrowing hour. . . .

. . . For some time he must have stood, studying his gloves and thinking thus, with nervous hands and lips that twitched. Then the white face and red eyes asserted themselves once more upon his consciousness. It was out of the question that he should communicate anything in particular to this young fellow, who belonged ostensibly to the mechanic or working class, and had no real or permanent authority in the Vicar's house. All the same . . .

"I suppose . . . the Vicar . . ." he began, and then, without exactly knowing why, broke off to ask: "Who, by the way, are *you*?"

"They call me Bassiemoor, sir," the white-faced guardian of the door replied. "I'm wheelwright's son in Whivvle."

"Oh. . . ." It was all the Rector uttered. So this was the carpenter's son he had heard speak of; this was the fellow she had spent so much of her time with. It seemed a curious coincidence he should be here, taking charge of the Vicar's house as if he were a member of the family. A spirit of resentment, of indignation, at being involved in such a discreditable tragedy as this rose in him; a feeling that he wished to shake himself free of this oppressive atmosphere of ignoble sorrow, to get away without delay from these common, dreadful, unassimilable people, and regain the spacious liberty of Mersham, where his lungs could breathe again the boundless Mersham air.

"It is most unfortunate . . ." he said. "Under the circumstances, I will not intrude."

He turned from the hall, and the door closed quietly and respectfully behind him. He drew on his gloves, ignoring resolutely the ill-bred stares of supplication that the crowd fixed upon him as though hungry for some token, for some sign. He pulled himself into the dogcart; took the reins; drove off without so much as a second look at the stricken, blind-drawn house, showing not less disfeatured in its grief than the countenance of the wheelwright's son, or that other countenance he had not seen. This, then, was the end of all his thought and labor. This was the reward one got for dealing with people out of one's own sphere. Well, well. *His* conscience did not reproach him. He had done everything that a gentleman and a rector could. And there was trouble enough upon his mind without taking upon himself the trouble of these others. Poor Leonard D'Alroy! Ah! That was where his sympathies were needed. Perhaps there would be a telegram awaiting him at home. Would to God now the news from that end might be more favorable! He touched the mare persuasively with the whip.

XXXVII

DEAD!

Yes. She was dead. Blanche Bellwood was dead. She was independent of all rectors, fathers, brothers, neighbors, and the world. Free of all restrictions and reproaches; of the home that had been her prison for so long; of persecuting Time that terrified and taunted her; free of every fear that made life terrible, and hope whose sweetness made its cup too bitter. No longer did she care. No longer was she frightened, if they thought she was. She knew now the best or worst of that Hereafter world to whose study and interpretation her father had lent the best years of his life; which so

often, and with so little heed, she had listened to him expound. In a flash, in the twinkling of the omniscient eye, she knew the things that troubled and perplexed him, and that still he taught; and that, save for her ice-cold lips, now with her present knowledge she could have challenged or confirmed. But Death's safeguard is its silence. If the dead could only talk of death as the living do of life, the grave would lose its grandeur and serenity, and prove itself no better than the world from whose wickedness it claims to offer shelter, and from whose troubling, peace.

From the first the seed of this dark and fatal flower had been in Blanche's mind, along with all her other impulses of good and bad. It had grown side by side with her hopes and resolutions; the same tears and prayers had watered both. If from the sight and thought of others this mortuary plant was all-concealed, its gardener knew where, among other shrubs of sturdier growth, it pushed its stem and spread funest and melancholy leaves. In the surreptitious quietude of her heart she visited the spot whereon it grew, and by periodic contemplations accustomed her courage to its awesome and forbidding aspect. Always, when life seemed terrible and her punishment too severe, after every conflict with herself in which her resolution fell, after each hard word her brother uttered . . . it was to this dark flower she turned for fortitude and consolation. At last, by long familiarity, it came to have no terrors for her in the contemplation. It was a familiar feature of her mind. It was but one alternative among many, like life itself and suffering, pain, and shame and sorrow. She did not care. She was not frightened. If the worst came to the worst, there was always this.

The Blanche of old had been no thinker. The Blanche of old had been compounded of proclivities alone, whose irresponsibility sustained her. But the new Blanche was forced into thought by the pressure of her circumstance, and thought became the medium that she lived in. At first the legendary view of sin and expiation, culled from remembrance of her father's

preachings, had urged her to submit to her state as to a punishment deservedly incurred—forcing her repentant lips to acknowledge it of God—and sent by God for her soul's cleansing. And for awhile, immersing herself in this implicit state of unquestioning submission to the Divine will, she seemed to find a certain consolation. But it was illusory. Even by her bedside, with her eyes closed and prayer upon her lips, her soul dilated to the awful reality. Submission was but a shutting of the eyes. Fact remained, unaltered and unalterable. Nothing could remove her punishment now. Even God could not undo that which had happened. Even God could not restore her character, and reclaim her reputation unharmed from all the whispers that fed upon it. For such as she, prayer was unavailing. If only it had not happened, prayer might have saved her. But now . . . now this punishment sent of God, out of all proportion to the trumpety sin to which it was directed—now this punishment must be borne to the extreme and utter limits of her life. All her life long, thenceforth, she must be submissive; all her life long she must bow to the burden of the Divine will, acknowledging God's punishment as just, God's mercy infinite. Oh, it was too bad, too bad, that she alone should thus be made to suffer! Why could not he, too, be forced by God to take his share along with her, and live as she was living, and suffer as she suffered and was doomed to suffer? But God, being a Man, favored men most horribly. He let them do things. He let them do anything. They could please themselves, like Harold did; and God, like her own father, took no notice. Perhaps He dursn't. They hadn't need fear Him and what would happen them all the time. Oh, if only there had been no God, what a different, happier world it might have been!

And yet, her quarrel was not so great with God. It was small ill-will she bore Him. It was not God that kept her thus indoors. It was not God whose eyes she feared to meet, whose voice and scorn she dreaded. What He had done He had done, and got it over. There was no arguing with Him,

but at least He never worried her if she let Him alone. It was her fellow-creatures she dreaded; the world of sinners like herself, whose sins taught them no charity, who turned suspicion from themselves by decrying the sins of others. And then, too, not only did the present make her life susceptible to every taunt and covert look and whispered word, but the future brought dreadful possibilities in its train, and traveled with a terrible rapidity. She saw her father dead and buried, and this home of intolerable happy memories (once called sickening) broken up; and her brothers dispersed; and herself, with what should come to her, facing a world ten thousand times more formidable than this dread world of Whivvle that lay beyond their door. For who would want her then? They did not even want her now: All their words and looks and actions were against her. For her father, at Harold's instigation, had written to her married sister to ask if . . . when the time drew nearer . . . and her sister had replied in terms of indignation and refusal. She had not seen the letter. She had only heard it discussed, standing on tiptoe in the hall, with all her pride on fire; and learned its tone from the tone that Harold's voice and attitude reflected from it.

Well? Pride was not going to be beholden to anybody's pity; not even a sister's, not even a brother's. Pride was going to be as proud as them. Pride would do Pride knew what, first. If they didn't want Pride, Pride didn't want them. Pride didn't care. Pride wasn't frightened of them, or that. Pride wasn't going to be lowly all her life, and wear sad clothes, and keep out of people's way when people called, and speak in a low voice because of what had happened, and work forever at the things Pride hated, just to show how penitent Pride was.

And at last, exhausting every expedient that Care could think of, Pride's alternatives were reduced to two. Pride had Fondie Bassiemoor, or (God help her!) the only other. Her pledge to Fondie Bassiemoor was sacredly and loyally kept. All day long the wheelwright's son and his proposal filled her thoughts.

Times innumerable, to be at peace with her soul and burst those iron bonds that bound her, she almost cried: "I'll do it. I will. I'll go to him!" Almost, but not quite. Something, when the vow was on her lips, caused her to shrink, to waver; to realize she could not do the things her desperation begged her to do. And the forbidding factor was Pride—always Pride.

She could not go and claim so great a sacrifice—even of Fondie Bassiemoor. She had taken a bicycle, money, friendship, favors innumerable in the past; but this she would not take. She had no right to it. Nothing in her relations with him deserved it. Until quite recently she had proclaimed him sickening, and thought him so. Now that she realized what "sickening" really meant, and what a fund of generosity, self-sacrifice, and goodness it contained, she was not going to put her shame on his shoulders, and make him bear the disgrace that she alone had earned. She said to herself a terminative "No, no! I won't. I aren't going to. I wouldn't before. I shan't now, just because of this."

And then, in crises of the most terrible solemnity, curiously trifling and petty considerations take their place and participate, almost with the force of determining factors. Why had not Fondie Bassiemoor possessed the courage to cry "Tonight" when her hesitations challenged him? Why had he not displayed that quality of compulsive passion that woman looks for instinctively in man, instead of leaving all to her free will: freely only in name, and the more fettered for its delusive liberty? He should have urged her; overmastered her; given her weak sex the respectable pretext of force it needed. But he had not done so. If he had only pressed her after this coercive fashion, who knows (she told herself) but that she might have yielded. And an element of instinctive jealousy mingled with her bitterness at the fault in him. The young gentleman of the aud hoose was coming back. Soon there would be no meetings with Fondie Bassiemoor outside the gate. Even the shortening nights were turned against her. He and Lancelot would pursue their

friendship undisturbed, lost in their own society and interests, while she . . .

At heart she knew it was unfair to Fondie, this bitterness, howsoever faint, that filled her; but it was true to her sex that composes so many of its judgments by the willful elimination of the factors capable of altering them; preferring the freedom of perversity to the slavery of logic. Her bitterness to Fondie was but a means to shift a portion of her burden to his shoulders, and make him bear at least some part of her own blame; in which respect the wheelwright's son would have been the last to wish it otherwise. But Oh, if his sorrow now could but have known how utterly her happiness and safety hung on him—by how tragically little he had lost her!

For, in the measurement of fate, it was no more than a hair's-breadth. She stood at the aud hoose corner, in the shelter of the hedgerow, when he took his leave. Had he but come alone, or earlier, who knows the course Blanche Bellwood's life and his might then have taken? But the young gentleman came with him, and already she had waited many minutes at the aud hoose corner. She heard their voices, fragments even of the things they said; and to her mind their talking seemed untroubled and interminable. Their comfortable intercourse was disturbed by no remembrance of her. Their friendship, so close and confidential, brought back old memories of bitterness like the glimpse of some firelit, cheerful, radiant room from which she was, and must remain, an outcast. And then—the young gentleman laughed. That laugh went to her soul. It epitomized their happiness and crystallized her own misery. What was she to them? They did not want her. The circle of their friendship was complete; there was no place in it for such as she. Let her go. She had heard enough. She had learned her last, most bitter lesson. She would wait no longer here. And with her hands pressed to her temples she turned away walking impetuously through the lane that, not two minutes later, Fondie trod in melancholy quest of her.

She had come prepared. She had come prepared for anything. All day long her thoughts had been intent upon this evening, attaching to it a fateful and supreme significance. Something within her—that was not decision, for it remained unexpressed, and yet was all the more decision because courage shirked its pronouncement—something within her divined that tonight was not as other nights; that final issues must be tried by it. And so she had dressed herself with extra and acutely conscious care. All that she stood in would bear the test of the friendliest, or the unfriendliest, regard. Eyes, whether scornful or compassionate, whether loving or indifferent, should find no fault with what she wore. Two handkerchiefs she carried, chosen of the whitest and the best she had; drenched with the last drop of bouquet perfume from the little fancy bottle her shame had never dared to open or to use since the day of her renunciation of the world. And all else that she wore was of her best: her shoes new blacked that afternoon; her silk gloves brought from their long and orderly seclusion in the lavender-scented, scrupulously tidy drawer of the new dispensation. True, she had no money in her little purse. All these weeks she had been penniless, and pride could not stoop to ask of those whom shame had so deeply injured. But save for that, she was equipped for anything, and anywhere. And if her journey should be a far one, why then she was equipped for that no less. . . .

Moving very swiftly, she walked straight home from the aud hoose corner, but she did not enter by the gate that Fondie subsequently passed and that the Rector swung before him when he called. She skirted the vicarage by the grass lane and took the field way to the paddock, and thence diagonally to the pond, just as in days gone by, when the sun was shining hard overhead and all the world was blue and gold and green, she had swung blithe-heartedly with her *Sacred Sunday Budget* to seat herself beside its midge-infested water and read in expectation of some bicycle bell. But now no sun was shining; the grass she walked over was short and sodden, sucking at the

heels of her new-black shoes as if to stay them from their purpose—protesting this was no place for them; beneath the cloudy, starless sky, and darkened by the clustering trees, the water of the pond that February's snows and rains had swollen lay dead and soulless. She stood upon its lumpy marge, upon one of its inconsiderable hillocks, where in the days gone by she had reclined before her crumpled book, plucking the buttercups and daisies within reach of her restless hand and blades of grass to bite at, and from here she looked into its liquid countenance and shivered.

And in that posture, gazing awfully at Eternity through this most dark and miserable portal, she heard the rumble of the Rector's dogcart, though she lacked the capability of the carrier's wife to divine its ownership and mission. Nevertheless, the sound of it drew her head away from the dark object of her contemplation, and she turned her eye and ear towards the house, where, beyond the paddock and the garden, she could descry the gleaming kitchen window. Who was it? Who had called?

Her curiosity, feminine to the last, clung to the question, and was still engaged with it when she heard her name exclaimed into the darkness from the kitchen door. All her nature, relaxed in speculation, stiffened rebelliously at the sound. Her mouth hardened; the tide of interrupted trouble swept back upon her. She heard the name, first in her father's voice and then in her brother's. With lips compressed and a palpitating heart, she listened to its progress round the garden: "Blanche . . . Blanche!" in tones of urgency and anger. Now it was at the hen-house. Harold had opened the door; he had put his head inside. Scorn took its bitter toll of a sensibility so far to seek. What? Did he think she would be there? Then he was wrong. She was here; safe from him. Now it was nearer; it was at the garden end, where the gate let through into the paddock. She drew her breath and listened apprehensively. Did the voice suspect? . . . Was she so safe as she had deemed?

. . . No, the voice suspected nothing; the next time she heard it, it had receded. Her brother had his back to her; he was returning to the house. The thin gleam disappeared all at once that had betokened the kitchen door ajar. He had gone in. She was alone once more. She was safe—with this!

How dark it looked; how sullen and forbidding! Its waters were as threatening as Harold's voice had been. Could there be comfort there? Stop. Let her walk round these waters first of all. . . . Let her go quite near to them. Let her dip her fingers in this muddy marge. Let her make herself familiar with them, so that out of familiarity contempt might come, and she could enter them without a fear.

All unknown to herself in the extremity of her grief her tears were flowing. They ran from her as they run from the face of a little child weeping for sorrow's sake, and yet, while weeping still, paying heed intently to all the interests of life around her. For what was she now but a little child—a little weeping, pitiable child, led by the hard and awful hand of the dark figure of Destiny, that would not let her go, but cowed and ordered her, and cried, "Come!"

So weeping, and so being led, protesting bitterly, and pitifully obedient, she went down implicitly to the water's edge, and the last articulate cry her lips uttered before the inexorable figure of Destiny led her by the hand through the dark veil of these portentous waters into the presence of Almighty God was, ". . . Oh, Fondie, Fondie!"

And who knows?

Who knows, Blanche, save you whose icy lips retain the secret safely locked behind them—who knows but that Destiny led you well and wisely, and that her cruel hand was kindest after all? For now you never can grow old; age can haunt you with no terrors. Respectability can never claim you as her rightful lifelong prey, and write upon your face the care-worn lines and characters with which, too frequently, she signals her elect. Life's victories are more ruthless than the

grave's, and death's sting less bitter than the tongue's. For tongues take toll forever, whereas death stings but once, and the grave is at least no darker than your grief once was. Death? Upon your pillow you have laid dead and dreamless many an hour; by the sedgy margin of the muddy pond itself, often on summer afternoons have you laid your face upon your arms, turned from the unbearable brightness of the sun and sky, and tasted a few brief minutes of irresistible, sweet death. And of the darkness never were you yet afraid.

But of this we may be sure. God, if indeed He be not a gentleman according to the Mersham Rector's standard, will at least be just. God's justice is greater than man's justice, and God's wisdom than man's wisdom, and God's love than man's love, and God's forgiveness—if divine justice have need of such a human quality—than the forgiveness of mortal man. For with God, no less than with His creatures, to understand is to forgive. And since with perfect understanding there can be no anger, the finger of God's wrath will harm you not. God's hand, be sure, is gentler than a child's; there is no thunder on God's lips, nor dreadful lightning in His eyes. If Fondie Bassiemoor were God you would not fear him. Fear God, then, less, nor think God's infinite mercy will suffer to be put to shame by the finite compassion of a wheelwright's son.

XXXVIII

AND all at once it seemed as if Death gave to Fondie Bassiemoor what Life had so persistently denied him, and Blanche Bellwood became, in the most spiritual, perfect, and sacred sense, his own. Every duty that her priceless clay imposed devolved on him. He it was whose hushed and solemn figure came and went across the threshold of the stricken house, and acted intermediary between her father's sorrow and the outer world, and did the things necessity, no

less than love, demanded; he to whom the Vicar poured out the fullness of his affliction, and in whose sympathy confided, weeping without constraint or reservation, and exclaiming between the paroxysms of his grief:

"... My dear friend. My dear friend! What should I have done without you? God bless you for all the kindness and comfort you have given me. . . ."

His own hands measured her, with the calm fortitude that love and resignation lend to duty, for her last repose. In the blind-dimmed room, upon her bed, he measured her, amid the heart-stifling, familiar evidences of her life; and looked in reverence upon the dead white face and the waxen lips, once red, parted even in death to show something of the big white smile beyond, and the white closed lids over the eyes of speed-well blue. And there her father had come to him, his solemn duty done, to feed his grief afresh upon the sight of her and weep beside her pillow, and beg the wheelwright's son in a broken voice:

"... My dear friend, join me in a prayer, I beg of you. Let us kneel together. . . . Your presence will lend me strength and comfort . . . and offer up our hearts to Almighty God! O God, our Heavenly Father . . ."

. . . And Fondie knelt; and Fondie prayed. For the Fondie that had borne milk in a little blue pitcher through Whivvle to feed the aud hoose cat by day and night was not too proud for prayer; and of the countless prayers that roll upward to the Throne of Grace from stricken bosoms, no ferventer outpouring of simple sorrowing souls ever reached God's ear. Viewed in its function as a prayer alone the prayer had little use, for Blanche was dead, with drops of water in her golden hair that trickled to the pillow as they prayed, and a brow as cold as marble, and fingers snowy white like alabaster—finger-tips that they had joined together on her bosom in a simulation of perpetual and curiously unconvincing prayer, that the faint elusive smile haunting her set lips seemed to find amusement in, as if it

said, "Go on! Don't be a silly fool, Fondie. I aren't praying, really. . . ." Never all the days of her life had the Blanche that Fondie knew ever assumed an attitude of such piety and devotional submission to God's decree.

But if the prayer they uttered on their bended knee, and that Blanche's upturned hands subscribed to, served no purpose—what then? Loveliness is independent of utility, and things of beauty need serve no better purpose than their own. This prayer was but the blossom springing from hearts of love; not more significant than a blossom is, but beautiful with the pure hues that sorrow lends, tremulous with tears and fragrant with affection. And when the prayer was over and they stood on their feet again, with lint on their knees that the Vicar had too little heed for, and Fondie too much reverence toward the dead, to brush off in that chamber, and the Vicar's trembling fingers relaid lingeringly upon the dear still face the handkerchief, removed for prayer, that covered it—her own white handkerchief, testifying to the late and more punctilious Blanche; the very handkerchief, maybe (with scent upon it then), that she had waved at Mersham—Fondie Bassiemoor dropped his voice to ask her father . . . if he had given any thought, sir, to . . . to coffin. He said the word "coffin" in a whisper; for "coffin" is an awful word (he knew), an awful and inexorable word, at such moments—a word that must be said, and rarely fails, when said, to draw fresh tears from sorrow's depleted resources. And the Vicar, putting his hand before his eyes, replied in broken tones: "He had not thought of it; he had not thought of it."

". . . Something simple," he told the wheelwright's son, "under the awful circumstances. . . . Something very, very simple, my dear friend—such as she would care for. No ostentation; no display. She would have been the last . . ."—his voice misgave him—" . . . the last to wish it. Let it be plain."

"But *good*, sir," Fondie suggested anxiously; for in his heart there was no coffin could be made too good for such a precious

freight as this. "You'd have it good, sir, I suppose." Even his modesty gave way before the clear sincerity of this great shared sorrow, and he spoke to the stricken father as perhaps under no other circumstances would his humble lips have spoken. ". . . People think a deal about such things, sir, in country. If we made it overplain, they might read it amiss. I'd like, sir, for Miss Blanche's sake and yours—and mine as well, if I might say so—that coffin should be worthy of her. It's last thing and only thing we can do for her, sir. . . ."

And the Vicar, yielding tearful submission to Fondie's argument and comforted by the sound of Fondie's voice, that paid such heartfelt tribute to his dear departed daughter, said he placed himself in Fondie's hands, and would be led by Fondie's counsel. "I leave it to you," he told the wheelwright's son. "I leave it entirely to you. You will do your best. You will do what is right. I can trust you, my friend, as my dear daughter did. She had a high regard for you. She would have wished, at such a time as this, to be in no more tried and sympathetic hands. . . ."

"Do not leave me too long. Come back and see me after a little while. I seem to need your comfort, my dear friend, in this dark hour."

And Fondie drove to Hunmouth for the oak that was to form her coffin; and set to work upon its making, in the workshop at the end of the wheelwright's yard, on the bench where Blanche had sat and cheered him with her company at his labor. He closed the paint-smear'd double workshop doors to the outer world, that his work might pass uninterrupted, and no intrusive presence should break the sacredness of his dedication to it, and no too curious eye should stare irreverently at the hallowed thing he wrought or talkful tongue distract the thought he wished to fix upon it. For Blanche seemed with him all the while; no squire's son or any other could rob him of her now. Death had brought him into close and wonderful communion with her. If any summons came that would not be denied by

silence, he left the workshop by the far and rarely opened door letting out upon the vegetable garden, and, making the circuit of the gable end, approached in silent and startling attendance on his summoners from behind. But before the softly knuckled summons and subdued voice of Mr. Lancelot the double doors at once dissolved; for the young gentleman was of the inner and elect—a denizen of that transcendent world of simple and exalted hearts where Fondie Bassiemoor abode, and whither by her death Blanche Bellwood was translated to live, apotheosed and glorified, henceforth forever. Fate, in that mysterious and incomprehensible way Fate has, had made of these discrepant personalities a trinity, inseverably bound by many curious, strong, and tender ties. They shared a spirit heaven of their own, that none beside could estimate or understand. The solid world they trod and touched and saw around them merged into an insubstantial visionary world, where all material things dissolved into the subtle essence of themselves, by which their earthly counterparts were spiritually interpreted and their beatific soulfulness revealed. Thus this coffin that Fondie Bassiemoor created with such reverent fingers assumed a host-like sacredness, filling all the workshop with solemnity and splendor. God seemed with them therein, no less than Blanche, the Vicar's daughter; and not a shaving strewn upon the floor nor a tool upon the bench nor anything, however labor-like and lowly, but took on the radiance of its solemn dedication, and shone with a new and hallowed effulgence. The day, without, was one of those March days of quick-chasing cloud and sunlight; one of those days when all the world seems each alternate moment filled with the tumultuous effort to burst forthwith, full-budded, into spring. Now the workshop would darken and the shadow of the presence of death would seem to permeate and possess it, and for awhile the light falling upon the bench through the tiles of translucent glass would grow metallic hard, and turn from that to an ashen mortuary gray; and sorrow would have her home there. And

then, on a sudden, the sun would burst out without an instant's warning, and the workshop would leap into rapturous glory, as though God Himself had entered, and all the workshop rose to laud and greet Him.

And there in the place filled sometimes with the splendor, and always with the presence, of God, Fondie Bassiemoor worked at the sacred casket that was to contain the perishable part of her whom he had loved dearer than any other on earth; and the young gentleman stood gravely by, and begged to be allowed the smallest privilege of helping him; and Blanche's coffin expressed the love and labor of them both. Little did either know, and less suspect, that their very friendship had contributed to what they worked at; and when the young gentleman begged, "Let me, Fondie . . ." anxious to participate in this solemn ritual of friendship, and Fondie let him, he little could have credited his laughter had been for Blanche Bellwood the fatal turning-point, and for his friend the forfeiture of every hope. But that was past and gone, and God had evidently willed it so. And Blanche would bear no malice now. Blanche would never think of that. With Blanche everything was forgiven, freely and fully. On her bed no thoughts or memories of bitterness came to disturb the lips, or make hard and resolute the mouth, or break the fixed and infinite serenity of the marble countenance beneath the handkerchief which every now and then her father's trembling fingers raised that he might take a look of sorrowing love upon the features of his dear, misguided, but incomparable daughter.

And as they worked they talked in lowered tones of her, and of her life and the tragic ending to it. To the young gentleman she showed in memory as the fine-limbed, free-swinging Blanche of old, with the big smile that had once abashed him, and the blue eyes that made his own eyes blink, as the blue sky stared at might have done. To Fondie Bassiemoor, shaken still beneath her tragedy and his, she showed, too frequently,

a form cut out of rigid alabaster; or, more terrible to think of, a limp and lifeless figure by the margin of the pond—conforming in her inertness to every inequality of the sodden grass on which she lay; with water running from her clothes and hair back to its fresh disturbed and circling source, and dreadful mud upon her gloved hands, and clay upon her brow. It haunted his heart with the force of a reproach that it had not been he who found her; that he had taken every road but that which led to her, as though fate were resolved his services to seek and find her should be vain. And he blamed himself (so he confided to his friend) because the last time they discussed her whereabouts at the vicarage upon that fatal morning the thought had come to him. Like a knife it had stabbed him. But he plucked it out again, sir, saying, "No. She would never choose the pond. She would never go of her own free will there." And he had ridden off to Mersham instead, and searched all round the lake, peering intently into its deeper, clearer waters. They were so deep and clear and calm, sir, and looked him in the face so innocent and open, that he felt he had misjudged both them and her; and he rode back with new confidence to Whivvel, thinking that this time, for certain, they would have news of her . . . only to learn . . .

The young gentleman had never seen Death—save in pictures that had never thoroughly convinced him. To think of Blanche—the very emblem and embodiment of life—as dead presented a baffling problem to his imagination. He could not visualize her now in death; he could never think of her as still or laughterless or gravely silent. How did she look? He asked the question with bated inquiry. Did she look very terrible?

"Not terrible, sir," Fondie Bassiemoor imparted. At first he had fancied (maybe it was no more than his own trouble fancying it) that there was a look of pained surprise upon her face, as if death had come upon her too suddenly. But since then she seemed to have changed a deal, sir. She looked, you

might say, very natural and peaceful—more peaceful, perhaps, than the young gentleman or Fondie's self, for the matter of that, had ever known her. Anybody would easily believe she was asleep, sir; or, maybe, not so much asleep as thinking to herself. It made him wonder what she could be thinking, sir; but they were happy thoughts enough, by looks of them. She seemed very contented where she was. Once or twice, in looking at her on a sudden, he had almost fancied he saw her smile. "But, of course . . . she hadn't," the young gentleman said. "She couldn't have."

"Why no, she hadn't, sir," Fondie acquiesced. "It doesn't stand to reason. It was only me." He subscribed a sigh to the requirements of reason and good sense, as if he parted half reluctantly with some cherished and consolatory illusion; as if it comforted him to think that still behind Blanche Bellwood's pallid brow was a dreamer's mind, and that a smile—though fainter than the smiles that life had known there—still played upon the threshold of their birthplace home, her lips.

"Did she do it . . . on purpose, Fondie?" It was a question they had skirted up to now, though it had been imminent in the young gentleman's eyes on more than one occasion.

"We can't tell what she did, sir," Fondie answered humbly, after a pause, as though testifying with sorrow to the imperfectness of all human knowledge.

". . . What do you think?"

". . . I should be sorry to think anything, sir," he insisted quietly, ". . . just now. I might think one way, and do her an injustice; or I might think another, and do it myself. I'd rather not think any road, if you don't mind, sir, till later, and if you won't think I'm trying not to answer you. I don't even want to answer it myself, sir. Not yet."

The young gentleman, moved to regret his query by this revelation of the sorrowing depths of Fondie's heart, said suddenly: "I see. . . . Forgive me, Fondie. Of course."

For the law of the land had laid its hand upon the vicarage

this morning. It had not been a heavy hand. It had been, for the law, a very light and lenient hand—but it had enforced the cruel ritual that, above all else, the Vicar dreaded, and had drawn more women, shawled and aproned, with infants at their skirts and bosoms, to gaze upon the house where, in this tragic hour, sorrow superseded shame.

The hand rested more lightly on the Vicar's home than did their eyes; but it was the Law, and left a stigma and a stain; and these were only women; and to the stricken father this legal violation of the sanctity of sorrow seemed like dishonor to the dead. The coroner from Hunmouth drove over in his mud-splashed gig; and twelve of Whivvle's elders—including Joe Bassiemoor and the Psalmist, and Bless Allcot and Dod's father—passed through the portal of the darkened vicarage in solemn file and mounted the staircase to the chamber where Blanche lay, that the Law might look upon her through its dozen pairs of sworn juridic eyes, and be assured that this upon the bed was she, the Vicar's daughter.

But their stay was brief. No sooner had the vicarage door closed upon the hindmost figure, going in, than it reopened to let forth the foremost. And the judgment of the law was merciful. Consideration for the feelings of this man of God, and possibly (to a greater degree) some deference to the dignity of Mersham, conspired to make the verdict as light as any verdict upon one dear to us can ever be. She had never threatened to take her life, or do an act of such misguided rashness. There seemed no apparent motive. She was to have been married. There was no evidence to indicate deliberate intention. The testimony of the wheelwright's son had shown that the deceased had taken walks by night of late. On such a walk, in such a spot, she might have misjudged the proximity of the pond and stumbled into it, with fatal consequences. The coroner did not know whether the jury would feel disposed to recommend that the pond should be more securely fenced off against the possibility of any such occur-

rence in future. No; the jury (some of whom had very similar ponds in their own fields) looked vaguely at one another and shook their heads, and said they didn't know that it was like to do a deal of good. They brought in a verdict of "Found drowned," coupled with a vote of condolence to the Vicar and his family; and the twelve men dissolved into individuals once more, to discuss events with free and unconstrained and personal voices, and give opinions they never would have ventured to express before the Law; and the coroner drove home again; and the Merensea doctor returned to his patients, and Fondie to his solemn work of love; and the Vicar sat forlornly before the decrepit fire in the sitting-room, saying over and over to himself the words of the verdict: "Found drowned. . . . Found drowned! . . . My own daughter. My own Blanche! . . . Found drowned!"—words as cold and comfortless, as dead of human sympathy, as unresponsive and lifeless, as was her own body on its bed upstairs.

XXXIX

AND Blanche was laid to rest at last in her mother's grave, that under Fondie Bassiemoor's most thoughtful care had been got ready for her, draped with ivy and green leaves to mitigate its ruthlessness and lend to the yawning mouth a kind and even loving look: she was laid to rest in the coffin of paneled and unpolished oak that Fondie Bassiemoor, with the young gentleman's kindly aid, had made for her—whose very grain was permeated with loving memory and discourse of her. No such handiwork of human love, uncontaminated by thought of gain or mercenary end, was ever lowered into churchyard soil and hidden from the sight of men. Murmurs of admiration rose audibly from many a lip when it passed by, that made the lip of its creator tremble; and though, here and there, were those who—slavebound to convention—

missed the formal polish of bereavement and regretted that its paneled surface did not shine more and reflect a finer luster, these were but few compared with those who praised the work and said no handsomer had yet been seen. And all Whivvle went that afternoon to see. If Blanche could but have glimpsed these obsequies of hers she would have laughed to note their solemn incongruity. No argument of propriety can convince otherwise; for death changes nothing essential; it only makes an end. What was, still was; and only because it is not does it cease to be. Blanche, wrapped reverently in her coffin, and followed by twitching lips and bowed heads, was still—save for the breakage of this vital thread—the Blanche of life and laughter.

Death restored to her, and more, all that life had taken from her. If any justification for that last rash act were needed, here by her graveside was it to be found. All the scorn and hard things said of her, death had expunged with tears. Those whose lips had most offended now strove most anxiously to exculpate themselves. "It wasn't me, missus!" "Nor me." "Nor me!" "Some folk will be sorry for what they've said, now. They will an' all!" "She's had a lot to put up with." "My word, you may depend!" "I shouldn't care to be *him!*" "Whivvle won't seem same place noo Blanche has gone." "Why, it hasn't done of a long while, missus. It's seemed that dull and quiet." "She'll be missed. My word, she *will* be missed!" They drew upon bygone memory in this hour of trouble, as one draws upon a purse of hoarded gold in the solemn day of need. They recalled this, they spoke of that. To one she had said, "It's sickening!" Another remembered well her asking, "Which way's father gone?" A third tearfully deposed to having heard her say, "I don't care. I aren't frightened." Over these treasured sayings of her lips they shook their heads with the reverence for sacred relics. Nothing pertaining to her now was too trifling to preserve. Now that Death had claimed and taken her it seemed as if recollection,

resisting the cruel seizure, strove its uttermost to keep her sake alive. For with Blanche Bellwood something of Whivvle's very self was gone—something as essential to its wholeness as the blue sky or the beaming sun, or the green hedgerows or the golden corn. She had formed a part of its life and thought and custom; her laughter had lightened the dullness of its days; her presence, like a ray of sunshine, had served to kindle life and make it more endurable. Now with her loss the Whivvle that had been would be no more. Not only people die, but places too, and epochs pass away; and the Whivvle she had lightened and been part of died with her.

They laid her on no hearse, but bore her all the way by hand from the vicarage to the church, with napkins through the brazen handles of the coffin, after a simple but expiring country custom. And at the church gate her own father met her with the tears flowing down his cheeks, and greeted his dead daughter's body: "' . . . I am the Resurrection and the Life' . . ."

He had said—at first he had said—to Fondie: "My friend, . . . I cannot. My burden is more than I can bear. . . . Some other must perform this melancholy duty; not her father." But when he came to think on whom the duty would devolve, there seemed no colleague within call to whose mercies his fatherhood could confide her. All, in this hour of prodigious sorrow, assumed to his desolate heart the aspect of utter strangers. There seemed not one by spiritual right or human sympathy qualified to take his place and supersede him in this office to his dear beloved daughter. He said: "My friend . . . I must endeavor, if God will lend me strength. It is my place and duty." And first, as we have seen already, he said the funeral should be simple. The circumstances, not less than good feeling and his daughter's wishes, called for it. But when Fondie Bassiemoor, in all humility, proposed a hymn, he melted into tears of appreciative gratitude for the beauty of the thought. It was a beautiful thought; it was a beautiful

thought. If only his dear daughter . . . could have spoken, he knew it would have met with her approval. She would have wished it most devoutly. Nothing would have been nearer to her heart. And he selected two hymns with Fondie Bassiemoor, of which "Conquering Kings" was one, because that had always been her favorite hymn. She had loved that hymn. And Fondie, stirred by sorrow to equal depths of pious unvaracity, said, "It was one she had a fondness for, I know, sir." And so, because Blanche loved that hymn and always spoke of it as "Kinkering Kongs" in conversation and qualified it as "sickening," which was her term for all the best-beloved things, and it was her favorite hymn, they chose it, and the Vicar was moved to tender confidence in his approbation of the choice, telling Fondie Bassiemoor that his daughter, beneath an apparently external carelessness, concealed a devout and Christian nature, and people without his own peculiar opportunities of knowing her and judging her might be deceived into thinking her other and less serious than she was. To which Fondie Bassiemoor responded, with all the fervor of his heart, "There's nobody knows that better than me, sir."

"She was a dear, good, faithful daughter," her father testified; "a true, true Christian, my dear friend. No truer Christian or better, more devoted daughter ever lived. God knows how I shall fare without her. The house feels lost."

"I know how *you*'ll miss her, sir," the wheelwright's son affirmed, "by what I miss her myself."

"You miss her?" the Vicar inquired with a face of agonized paternal rapture. "My dear, dear friend! Thank you. . . . Thank you. God bless you for missing her, and all your kindness."

"Everybody misses her, sir. There's nobody could be missed more." Politeness, even in sorrow, would have liked to add, "except yourself, sir," out of consideration for the Vicar's feelings; but loyalty to the dead and the fundamental force of his conviction forbade it.

"They do? They do?" Her father sought refuge from the insufferable goodness of human hearts in his own tears again. "You are too kind. Everybody is too kind. I do not deserve such kindness. I cannot bear it. But it is for her sake, I know. I owe it to her. She was beloved of all."

And they sang the hymns no better for all the sorrow that afflicted and deterred them, in the church where she had sat and sucked peppermints and scribbled billets in the sight of God, with whom forevermore she was. Tears fell upon Fondie's fingers as he played, and rendered the keys treacherously wet and slippery; and if he had not known the hymns by heart, and the number of their verses, he never could have played them even as imperfectly as he did. But he was not the only one that wept; the church was filled with weepers. Blanche's brothers did not weep, for all they sat with their heads in their coat collars up to the ears; but as for the Vicar, he only read one half of the appointed chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians and wept the other, beseeching the congregation, "Bear with me, dear friends!" whilst he wiped the teardrops from his spectacles and blurred eyes.

And in the churchyard, where her mother was, while the church daws wheeled noisily about the tower, and the birds, obsessed with the hastening spirit of spring, chose building sites in hedge and yew and holly and gathered straw and blades of withered grass and feathers from amongst the tombs, and broke out into riotous song above the Vicar's faltering words as if their joy could be contained no longer—there they laid Blanche Bellwood to her rest at last, to keep her supreme appointment, this time with God; wrapped in the yellow sister clay of which herself had been in life so fair and loved a creature.

XL

SPRING was two days nearer and more than two days warmer when Fondie Bassicmoor, paying his daily visit to the churchyard—that was become with him a duty not less conscientious than his ministration of the aud hoose had been—stood in the afternoon by Blanche's grave. Already the flowers heaped upon it, the white trumpet-lilies of purity and splendid faith, and the humble daffodils and fragrant violets, were fading fast upon the mound that marked amid the trampling of the sward where Blanche, the dearly beloved, slept. He stood for awhile before her sacred resting-place with doffed cap, thinking, or perhaps praying; in practice they are much the same. To think of anyone with kindness is a prayer. We never recall with gratitude an act of kindness, a kind look or a kind word, but in some sort we pray. If that be so, then Fondie prayed, and was still lost in silent prayer when Mr. Lancelot joined him. That is, he did not join him first of all, noting the doffed cap and the attitude of solemn meditation, but held apart awhile, reluctant to trespass on the privacy of Fondie's thought; and it was Fondie who, conscious of his presence, turned and with a pleasant gravity said, "Now, sir."

There was a smile upon his face; the quiet smile that sorrow wears when it is reconciled at last to all the bitterness that gave it birth, and grows assured and wonderful mild. It was the first time the young gentleman of the aud hoose had paid a visit to Blanche's grave, nor was he there to see her laid in it. But Fondie knew the cause of that, and said he understood and sympathized; "And so would she, sir!" But the old gentleman was getting on in years, and it behooved Mr. Lancelot to obey him all he could now, sir, while he had chance of it. Duty came before all else, and whatever folk lost by doing that, sir, they didn't lose a deal.

The young gentleman, drawn forward by Fondie's kindly "Now, sir!" came near to his friend's elbow, expressing sorrow for disturbing him.

"You're not disturbing me, sir," Fondie answered. "I was just looking at grave, that's all. I'm glad enough to see you."

"Anne told me she thought that you were here," his visitor explained. "I've been round. . . ." His eye fell upon the mound of yellow clay that the sun and wind had dried, and upon the forlorn array of faded flowers that the sun and wind had cut and slain; and the look in his gaze deepened.

". . . So she's there!" he said in a voice of curious reflection, after he had scrutinized her resting-place awhile.

"Yes, she's there, sir," Fondie acquiesced, with a simplicity that was almost cheerful. "It's a pleasant spot to lie in, and it'll be pleasanter after awhile, when spring comes. Birds are building hard. I noticed them when we buried her."

"Is she very deep down?"

"About six feet, sir."

"Six feet!" The young gentleman's eye calculated the depth, and he seemed to shiver. "How awful."

"Why, not so awful, sir," his friend dissented in his curiously complaisant voice. "To us, maybe; but not to her. Things that are over and done with aren't awful to anybody; it's only things in front of us that we've got to go through. Besides . . . her mother's there as well, sir. Her mother comes first. It can't be very dreadful to lie along with somebody that loved you . . . with them above that loved you looking down upon you, sir, and thinking of you."

The young gentleman subscribed a hesitating "No," as if his prejudices were even yet not altogether converted.

"Fondie . . ." he said after awhile, during which they gazed together at the drear and flagging flowers, ". . . do you believe in God?"

"There's some that doesn't, I know, sir," Fondie said, without the least tonal reproof of their infidelity.

"But you? Do *you*?" And as Fondie's lips still expressed a pious reluctance to commit themselves to any final pronouncement on so vast and vexed a subject, his friend added (as though to reassure a lurking heterodoxy and lend encouragement to truth): "*He* doesn't, I know. He's said so. He's said it will be time enough to believe in God when we are at Mersham. That's why we never go to church, of course. He says if we can't go to church in the right and proper way, and sit in the right pew . . . we won't go at all. He says God is like every other great friend one makes. When one has done all the work oneself, and had all the hardship and anxiety, and got one's way in the end, then God deigns to take notice of you, and tries to make you believe He's helped you all the time and you owe everything to Him. When we get to Mersham, he tells me, I shall find God very useful to me there; but until that time comes I shall do well to remember that I have only the two of us to depend on, and all the rest of the world's against us. Of course he doesn't include *you*. I suppose he doesn't believe in God at all, really. If there is a God . . . why has He kept Mersham from us all this time? Why did He let the D'Alroys come . . . and Blanche die? What, Fondie?"

"Don't think I haven't thought the same, sir," Fondie answered, "for I have, many a time."

"Do you believe in Him, then?" his friend demanded. "Really and truly?"

"I doubt I don't, sir," Fondie answered after a deep breath. "Not in the way you mean. For if I did, I shouldn't ask myself, nor yet Him, the things I do. And yet to doubt Him is to admit Him in a manner of speech, sir. There's many disbelievers that serve Him better than some that profess to believe, without troubling to make sure what it is they do believe, and would think it sin to call His name in question. I know it's difficult to be what He is, sir. I've often thought so when I felt disposed to doubt Him and His works. I should

make but a poor business of it myself if I had the doing of it. I doubt I should never let anything happen anybody, even if it ought to happen by rights. I should spoil folk, sir. I should leave them nothing to do for themselves."

He stooped and recomposed with pious fingers the wind-blown flowers of a wreath.

"I've sometimes thought, sir," he continued, since the young gentleman still preserved a listening and attentive posture, ". . . I've sometimes thought that it wasn't for us to question God and prove Him by words, but do our best to show Him in our lives—whether He's anywhere else or not. God's in us, that is to say, sir; and we're in Him—though it's hard at times, I'll admit, to know which part of us is which and whose voice is whose. But if we say that God begins where self ends, we shan't be far to seek, I think, sir. The things we do for self, they may be good or they may be bad; but the things we do for anybody else's sake, I don't think God will judge those things amiss, sir, whoever and wherever He may be—whether He lives in heaven, as some believe He does, or in our hearts, and subsists on us, as you might say, and on our doings. 'For it is God'—so St. Paul tells us, sir—'which worketh in you both to *will* and to *do* of His good pleasure. . . . Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. . . . Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true; whatsoever things are honest; whatsoever things are just; whatsoever things are lovely; whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise . . . think on these things.'

"St. Paul doesn't forbid us to think of anything, sir, so long as we think honest and true; and thought hurts nobody—least of all God. God should bide thinking on, sir—whether it's to doubt Him or believe Him. When little childer say anything against us we don't take it very much amiss, remembering what they are; and we're only children ourselves,

sir, measured against Him. He doesn't stand to be out of course angry with any of us, whatever we think or say or do.

". . . I beg you'll forgive me, sir," he broke off with an apologetic smile. "You asked me for an answer—not a sermon."

"No, no. . . . Go on, Fondie!" the young gentleman besought him. "I like listening to you. You make it sound so easy to be good. Whatever you say seems right." He added in a burst of appreciation: "You ought to have been a clergyman, Fondie. I've said so lots of times."

"I doubt I'm better as I am, sir," Fondie modestly opined. "I doubt I'm what I was meant to be."

"But you don't mean . . ." his friend interposed with a sudden voice and look of misgiving, "you don't mean to give in! Now! Because of this!" His gaze indicated the mound and flowers at their feet.

"No, sir," Fondie reassured him. "I don't mean to give in. Even what we are, and what we were meant to be, we can still improve on. There's no wheelwright born, however good he was, but had scope to be better if he'd tried. What I do mean, sir . . ."—he looked about him as if to find in the circumjacent things he saw, his meaning's definition—"I've thought a deal about myself, and learned a deal as well, sir, lately, and I've thought: Why should I try and fit myself for another sort of life when I've never made best advantage of the one I've got? A man can only do his duty, sir, whatever life he's born in or struggles to. And there are duties for me here—more duties than I can do, to do them as they should be done—without striving after other duties that I know very little about, sir, and mightn't see so plain as these."

"What duties?"

"Why . . . there's my father, sir, for one," Fondie answered. "He's getting into years, sir, now, and can't do the things he could once upon a time. He worked hard enough

for me when I was little and couldn't work; and it's for me to work my best for him, now he's old and can't. And then, there's my mother, sir."

". . . But can't your sister look after her?" the young gentleman demanded.

"Why, she can, sir; and she does," Fondie attested. "But my sister's a woman now, sir, and I think she's getting restless to be wed and have a house of her own. It's only natural. I hope she will."

"And *you'll* want to be getting married too," his friend contended, "as well as her."

Fondie's face flushed ever so slightly at the suggestion so loyally made, but it recovered its serene composure on an instant.

". . . I don't know, sir," he said evasively. "Maybe not. Sometimes I think not ever, now."

The young gentleman had expostulation on his lips, but the shape of them dissolved upon an enlightened and almost inaudible "Oh!"

"My sister's five years older than me, sir—than I am. She falls to go first. Anyhow, I ought to be able to bide as long as *she's* done."

The young gentleman exclaimed: "You always give way, Fondie. It's always you that stand aside for other people. You'd give way for anybody."

"Somebody's got to give way, sir," Fondie reminded him. "You're not the only one that has said it," he confessed. "Lots of folk have told me same thing, and blame me for it. I know I give way very easily, sir, but that's maybe the reason I should. I only do what I'm best fitted for. It doesn't cost me as much effort to give way as it costs some people. And both sorts are needed to make a world, sir; both them that give and them that take. . . . There's Vicar too, sir, now. He seems to depend on me a deal since what's happened. I feel I want to stop and do all I can to help him—if it's only for Her sake."

Mr. Lancelot acknowledged huskily: "I see. . . . Perhaps you're right."

"Why . . . even if I'm not right, sir," Fondie comforted himself, "it's meant right. We can only see a little way in front of us, and that not very clearly at times. But we shan't do any better for trying to see too far ahead, and calculating about things beyond us. Very often, time we're calculating, sir, chance we had has gone by. Chance has gone by!" He seemed to be meditating over his own words. "I've done many things that were wrong things, maybe, when you looked at them very close and studied them, but I don't regret them. Wrong and right can't be learned off, sir, like multiplication table. For instance . . . we were talking about duty, sir. . . ."

And then, by Blanche's grave, he confided to the young gentleman for the first time the faithful history of his encounters with her, and the momentous making of the great proposal. "I meant letting you know all the time, sir," he explained. "I wanted you to. But somehow, I couldn't bring my lips to speak of it while now."

"And you really meant it?" his friend exclaimed, incredulous that such a terrific project really represented Fondie Bassiemoor, the wheelwright's son. "You would have gone away . . . with her?"

"I meant it, sir. Yes. I would have gone anywhere she liked to name, sir."

"And you would have given up everything—everybody? Your father and mother and sister? Me?" He dwelt with a certain accent of reproachfulness upon the pronoun, but Fondie Bassiemoor was too deeply imbued with the sacred spirit of truth to seek to justify the apparent disloyalty of his conduct by paltry exceptions.

"I would, sir," he said. "I'd like you to know me as I am, and see what anybody can be capable of, for all their talk of duty."

"I call it splendid of you," the young gentleman declared,

out of the fullness of his heart. "I never thought you had it in you—never."

"... And look, sir. I meant to show you." Fondie drew from his breast pocket with cautious reverence some object carefully preserved in tissue paper. "Vicar asked me only this morning if there was anything of hers I could value, and cared to name, to remember her by. There were some bangles he showed me, sir. Not that they had much value, except that she'd worn them. He said they were very precious to him . . . but he could spare me one if there was nothing else I liked to ask for that he could spare better. I ventured to ask for this, sir." It was unwrapped at last, and held to view: her prayer-book. Blanche's prayer-book, destitute of half the morning service and of innumerable pages besides, and scribbled over by many hands, contesting and confusing ownership. But hers—Blanche's very own. The prayer-book that had lain neglected on the ledges of the varying pews she sat in, and had been held before her blue eyes and pressed against her white teeth, and interposed—who knows how often?—as a screen between her laughter and her father's eyes. As the young gentleman looked at it, a page—one of a number torn and loose—fluttered to the ground. He picked it up and hesitated in the act of its return.

"May I? . . . Can you spare me just this one, Fondie? There are lots more."

It was a great request to make, and for a moment Fondie Bassiemoor's lips seemed as hesitating as the young gentleman's hand had been. But when the hand, sensing Fondie's reluctance, proffered the leaf at once, "No! Here, Fondie. I oughtn't to have asked you!" Fondie's momentary doubt dissolved. Fondie gave way. Fondie did what Fondie was (maybe) best fitted for. "No, no, sir. I didn't mean that. Keep it, if you've a wish. You're very welcome. I know Blanche would have given you as many as you'd liked to ask for. I know very well it'll be in good hands, sir, that will take care of it and treasure it, for her sake."

There came a silence over them both, and out of it the altered voice of Mr. Lancelot emerged to ask the old and haunting question: . . . Had he? . . . Did he? And the old and haunting answer greeted it: Why no, sir. Fondie hadn't. Fondie didn't.

"I've been inclined to blame myself, sir," Fondie said. "It might have made a difference if I had 'a done. And when she was laid dead, sir, and I looked at her upon her pillow, I felt . . . why I felt, sir, I'd like to place one kiss upon her before we put her out of sight forever. I could have done. I had chance, sir. I'd many chances. I was the last that looked at her. And I know she wouldn't have minded it . . . from me, sir; such a kiss as I had thought and wish to give her. I know Vicar himself couldn't have minded, if I'd begged leave of him. . . . But it seemed like taking advantage of her then, sir, when she couldn't help herself, and hadn't chance to say yes or no. And so I didn't, sir, for all I know she'd have said 'Yes, and welcome.' All my life I never kissed her, sir."

They looked together at the grave.

". . . But there's one thing I did, sir, that I'm glad of. I laid a bunch of violets in coffin, beside her. I asked Vicar if I might, and he said . . . why, he said I might, sir. And I did. They're down there with her now."

XLI

THERE seem the elements of immortality in Joe Bassie-moor's beard. All other members of his person pay toll to time but this that shows no change that human eye can see as the weeks and months roll by. The sunlight, pouring out of the soft and milky blueness of a June sky and filling the wheelwright's yard with warmth and glory, five years later, finds the wheelwright in it; and only his legs, and the two sticks with which he reinforces them, bear testimony

that time moves more assuredly than they do, and that despite the seeming unchangeableness of his beard, he is not of the essence of eternity, like this that he competes with.

He sits in the ashwood chair—where he usually sits on summer days outside the kitchen door—with a cushion under him for comfort and the sticks on either side, warmed by the sun and sheltered from the breeze, with the roadway visible to his right eye and the workshop to his left; still, in semblance, the dominating spirit of the yard. His sight is such as he may give thanks for; his hearing is not so bad but, with the help of a hand, he can hear and take an order—albeit his memory has a habit of forgetting it when taken; his voice is strong enough to reach the workshop, or the house behind his back; and time has softened his patriarchal piety to a wonderful extent. The sound of human voices is consolatory to him. He never rebukes discourse, or bids loquacity to hold its noise. On the contrary, he invites it, and will even raise one stick or the other in signal to the roadway when figures pass, as testimony that Joe Bassiemoor is here at home and willing to receive any such callers as care to call and take a seat upon the wooden bench beside him. And towards his own son, Fondie, more than to any other has the wheelwright's disposition changed. For he has utterly and publicly discarded the mantle of authority that once, so unremittingly, he wore. Fondie's is here the power, and Fondie's the glory. Nor does he seek—as many fathers do, reduced by impotence to this sad last extremity—to keep his own undoubted excellences alive by depreciation of his son's, earning that respect for himself by criticism that he can no longer compel by labor. On the contrary, Fondie's is the name he quotes, and Fondie it is to whom all matters are referred. Fondie'll do this; Fondie'll do that. Aye! Fondie'll understand. If he dizn't, there's neabody else will. Fondie has no parallel in the world. There is none like unto Fondie; no, not one. If Fondie Bassiemoor had ever sought to take revenge upon his parent for severities'suf-

ferred at the latter's hands in youth, he could not have had it more poetically displayed than in the dependence to which his filial attentions have reduced the wheelwright. It is pathetic to see with what dependent eyes the old man follows him about the yard, as if existence hung upon this act of sight and to lose his son from view were to put life in jeopardy. Not that Fondie takes advantage of such undisguised dependence. He appeals to the wheelwright's opinion almost as much as in the past, and it is only in the wheelwright's answers that the altered relationship is revealed; for the wheelwright no longer bids him "Hod thy noise!" or comments, "If thoo can't do it wi'oot asking, it's time thoo could!" but much more probably rejoins: "Nay! Thoo mun't ask me, lad. Thoo can do it well enough wi'oot. I'se an aud man. I'se no use ti anybody, noo."

The sun pours down upon the wheelwright's beard—that is tow-colored and flaxen still, and will, in all probability, never attain any nearer than this degree to a snowy and venerable hue. From the yard-end, to those who do not know it, it gives the sitter the semblance of being wrapped up in a blanket, and is, beyond all question, a wonderful example of its species. With the acquirement of years and leisure the wheelwright has discarded the chewing of the cud (which, consequently, he is now at liberty to condemn in others as a slothful and uncleanly habit) and gives himself the more Christian solace of a pipe. And such a pipe he is smoking with evident enjoyment, judging by the length of the pulls he takes at it and the noise his lips make about its gum-fretted stem, when Fondie Bassiemoor puts his head ecstatically from the workshop door and says:

"Do you hear yon, father?"

The wheelwright takes the pipe-stem from his lips to ask: "Yon what?"

"Yon bells, father," Fondie tells him. "Hark! You couldn't hear them much plainer without wind was very fair. Aye! There they go. He'll be married by this time, sure enough."

"Who'll be married?" the wheelwright inquired, listening to the blue sky as Fondie did, with his pipe still held a couple of inches from his lips, to be ready when they should return to it.

"Why . . . Mr. Lancelot, father. You haven't forgotten?" Fondie adjured him. "Surely!"

The wheelwright took a silent pull at the pipe-stem as an easy method of indicating that he had.

"Where's he being married?" he asked next moment. "Mersham?"

"Nay, he's not being married at Mersham," Fondie answered. "Mersham isn't grand enough for such as her. She needs a grander place than Mersham. Married in London, father!" he said, raising his voice to make sure that the information should reach the wheelwright's understanding that it had reached a dozen times before. "But he'll be coming to live at Mersham before so long now," he told the old man. "They'll both be coming. Before month's out they'll both be there. And I hope they'll be spared," he added piously, "to live in it with health and happiness for many years to come. The old place doesn't look like same now, father. I want to drive you over one of these afternoons, now workmen are getting to an end, and let you have a look round."

"Nay, not me; not me!" demurred the wheelwright, sucking with swift emotion at the pipe-stem. "I'se an aud man. I'se no good to gan onnywheers. Mersham's over-grand for syke as me."

"Mr. Lancelot dizn't think so, father," Fondie assured him. "Mr. Lancelot said himself I was to be sure and take you."

"Mr. Lancelot never did! When did he?" the wheelwright returned, with signs of agitation about his beard.

"Why, last time he wrote to me, father," Fondie answered him. "He said I was to be sure and take you, and let you have a good look round, so that you could tell him what you think of it."

"Not him!" the wheelwright said; but the edification visible on his brow belied his words. "Mr. Lancelot dizn't want to know what I think on it. Mr. Lancelot dizn't want to be bothered wi' what aud men thinks. Mr. Lancelot's a young man; he wants young opinions, not aud."

But, this depreciative assessment of his own worth made, he was prompt to ask Fondie: "Did you think on, now, to thank Mr. Lancelot?"

". . . You may be sure I did, father," Fondie answered. "I thanked him for us both. I thanked him for you as well as me."

"Not that he wants *my* thanks," the wheelwright reflected, falling—after this reassurance—into his vein of pessimism once more. "He can do wi'oot them. He can get plenty o' folk to thank him wi'oot me. More folk by half than he'll know what to do with. Folk is ready to thank a gentleman like him for anything or nothing. They've got their hand to their forelock, very nigh, before he's chance to look at 'em. Where's thoo gannin?"

"Why . . . I just thought I'd go and take a look at churchyard, father," Fondie told him, but without the ancient diffidence based on the consciousness of paternal displeasure. "Frank's i' workshop. If you want anything you've only to call him. I shan't be long. Why . . . I mustn't be long," he added, admonishing himself, "for I've got to go to Mersham this afternoon and help wi' childer. They're having games and tea in park, yonder. Day couldn't have been finer for them, or Mr. Lancelot, or anybody. Now is there anything I can do for you before I go?"

No. There was nothing the wheelwright could think of. The wheelwright's memory was plainly going. Once upon a time the question would have furnished him with many things to think of and to utter.

Fondie said, "Very well, then, father . . ." and took his leave.

He walked with a businesslike step to the churchyard, to the spot where he and Mr. Lancelot had stood so often during their few last weeks together, five years ago. The mound of yellow clay and wilted sods had given place, since those days, to a heavy wheel-cross and curb of gray granite, that stood out strikingly against the weathered ledgers and discolored headstones round about; for the Vicar, too, lay in the same grave with his wife and daughter; and this memorial had been raised by Fondie Bassiemoor and others of the parish to mark their resting place. The grass within the curb was very green and very level, for Fondie kept it so. The care of this sacred spot attached to his most undelegatable duties. Once in ten days, or in every fortnight at the least, he paid it a custodial visit; not with any morbid or melancholy devotion—for of such he was devoid—but with the same spirit of cheerful regularity in which, by night, he wound up his watch. With Blanche's death all questionings and doubts were stilled. The fate that took her was, not less, his own. He accepted it and let his lips smile henceforth in speaking of that and her, as her own lips had seemed to smile in regard to death and him when he looked at them upon her pillow. And this morning he had come to visit her with the cheerfullest and friendliest intention. He had come to visit her on Mr. Lancelot's wedding day, and stand by her side whilst the bells rang out from Mersham, asking her (in the spirit, just as he had asked his father in the flesh) if she heard them, and knew for whom and in whose honor they pealed. And his spirit knew full well she answered, "Yes," and wished her erstwhile friend all joy and happiness in the state of life which Destiny had denied to her. She had no jealousies towards the living. Why should she have? There was but one life, and she was part of it, as he was. Each night he slept this life of his sank into darkness and oblivion, and for all he knew of it, or it of him, it might have never been. And yet it was. And so—who should say otherwise?—it was with her. Five years she had been dead—

as people reckon death—and still she was his friend; still he came to visit her, like this, and stood beside her grave, or looked at it each Sunday, and sometimes brought his troubles here that she might share them, and his perplexities, that her clear lips might solve them. And when he doubted or desponded, how often had he heard her voice exhort him: "Don't be a silly fool, Fondie! I know it's sickening; but never mind. Don't care. Be a man."

Since she had been laid to rest, others in those five years had come to join her: her father; Fondie's mother, not so far away—sleeping not less peacefully or less beloved beneath her less pretentious stone; and some, too, whose tongue had helped to build the whispering fabric of her trouble, but whose offenses now were lost in the great understanding, like the beams of some flickering taper that is quenched in the light of day.

At the vicarage another man of God is now installed—a younger than the last; clean-shaven, spruce, and energetic as yet with the interests of his new life and duties; who addresses Fondie punctiliously as "Mr. Bassiemoor" and pays him not a little deference as a man of import in the parish. Providence has endowed him with a family—two sons and a little five-year-old daughter with flaxen hair, who is already one of Fondie's firmest friends, and interrogates him most closely respecting the *BLANCHE* whose name is chiseled in portentous capitals upon the step of the great granite cross, and who had once actually inhabited the very house she lives in. And the aud hoose has new tenants too: nice, quiet, undistinguished business people from Hunmouth, with evidences of more money at their disposal than the old tenants had enjoyed, and a family of six noisy, healthy girls and boys. All the potential elements of tragedy are here again; recast into the melting-pot of life, that seems to keep itself eternal through the crucible of sorrow and the alembic of the grave.

And now his friend—his friend at heart, however clad before the world with terms of deference and conduct of respect—his

friend of old was coming back into his life once more. Not to the aud hoose of ineffable and sacred memories, but to the great house of Mersham after all; to the home that was acknowledged his at last. So now he would have to believe in God, and make much of Him, as his grandfather had said, and sit each Sunday in the big armorial pew where once Sir Lancelot and that other one had sat before they passed away to that great Unity where Blanche and all her fellow-dead were joined. He pondered over these things, standing by her grave in the wonderful sunlight of that June morning, filled with every hue and sound and fragrance that made life lovely, and let his simple heart enjoy the unimaginable wonders wrought by a destiny beyond the comprehension of such finite minds as his. It seemed a dream, even with the bells to waft its reality over his understanding, and the more unreal by reason of them—in whose music always Fondie's world dissolved into that mystic world compounded far more largely of his own emotions, infinite and inexpressible, than of the substantial elements by which he was surrounded. A dream. Yes, even as all life's loveliest and sweetest qualities are dreams, inasmuch as they are the farthest remote from the grosser subsoil from which they spring. And yet no dream, he knew, but a blessed reality—if reality is more blessed than its fellow-dreams! For what imports it whether things be realities or dreams so long as they be lovely and harmless? Little difference is there between things done and things dreamed of, save the inessential element of doing. Things once done subsist by dreaming of them, and without dreaming all fact is death. Yet human nature clings to fact, as human nature clings to its own clay, and Fondie, too, was not completely free from the affection of his imperfect kind for the so-called truth of fact and flesh and blood. Had he not seen Mr. Lancelot's bride (that but this very hour was) with his own eyes, and had he not shaken the hand she held out to him, saying in a voice suffused with friendship and tinged with a pleasant American-

ism: "You're Mr. Fondie Bassiemoor, I'm sure. I don't need to be told that much. I'm just charmed to meet you." And was not he appointed virtual supervisor over Mersham during the elaborate renovations that had been proceeding there these past six months; with keys of his own to use on all the doors just as he listed, and supreme power to come and go and ask and question—powers practically unlimited, because he was Fondie Bassiemoor and Mr. Lancelot's "oldest friend, Sadie," and could be safely trusted even with the infinite powers of the Destroying Angel's self? And had not Mr. Lancelot told him to look on Mersham as his second home, and pledged the assurance with his own warm hand: "Whatever else, Fondie, I shall always be at home to *you*. You know that, don't you?" And was not Mersham now to be reckoned among those most abundant blessings that Providence had showered on him? His life was veritably filled with friendships, interests, activities, and—yes! he might even count that blessing with them too—prosperity. Already he had shaped toward fulfillment that long cherished, too long neglected project of the restoration of the old organ in the disused loft at Whivvle. Since the Vicar's death he had given it from time to time deep thought. He had read books on organ structure; he had studied living organs in the district; he had tried his hand at wood carving, with promising results. Mr. Lancelot, no doubt, would help him ultimately in the composition of a suitable inscription, for the work was destined to perpetuate the memory of the Reverend Henry Bellwood and his beloved daughter Blanche, who worshiped God in the church, and departed this life on the such-and-such days of the months of so-and-so, respectively. And Mr. Lancelot, had he not espoused the idea with warmth, saying that it would be like old times, and that Fondie must let him come and help him now and then, when Mr. Lancelot was in residence at Mersham?

Ah, well! He had no cause for sadness or repining. Much happiness was his; great blessings had fallen to his lot—were

falling still. The larger part of life—reckoned in terms of human probability—was still before him. At heart, in body, he was still a boy; still by five years short of the thirty that might be said to set the seal on manhood. Before his soul was still a wondrous journey through the mystic paths of life; strange beauties, yet unrealized, for the eyes of his soul to rest on; blossoms of lovely sorrow and of starlike joy for the fingers of his soul to pluck. In this soul of his, perhaps, he had been most blest of all, for no matter how hard the world might seem or be to read, his soul had skill to construe and translate it. Some men are born to fortune, family, and fame; others are born with qualities of hand and head, of craft and power. Let all these nurse the gifts they have, and draw such consolation from them as they can. But Fondie Bassiemoor was born with that far rarer thing—a soul. Not all men—despite what theologians, even of the pectoral school, may argue—are born with that. Some men come into being with nothing but the organs designed to serve their bodies' needs; neither with a soul nor the rudest embryo of one that diligence can cultivate into the least account; men as destitute of soul as others are of riches, health, good name, music, mathematics, or poetry. But Fondie—to whom it brought comfort as exceeding great as that the Mersham Rector derived from horses, bulls, Sir Lance-lot, and his wife's connexions—had a soul for his inheritance; and by the graveside of his soul's friend gave thanks for it, letting his soul taste thus the sweet delights of its own gratitude, and know by the thrill of pleasant thankfulness going through it that it still was swiftly, wholesomely alive.

And in that spirit of simple thankfulness he took leave of his soul's dearest friend, threading his way—one might say almost blithely—through the weathered emblems of the dead, that leaned to this side and to that above the tall June grasses ripening for the Vicar's pony. Emblems of the dead? For Fondie's eyes there were no dead; this was no place of them. Here was a very pleasant little hamlet of the immortal blest; of

those made free of life by death. Memories lived on all sides of him; names familiar and friendly; tombstones affable and communicative, that invited him to stay and read and hold a little amicable converse with them on such a day as this, beneath so soft a sky and warm and bright a sun. And lovely though the day might seem to fleshly visions, what wondrous beauties were not spiritually displayed to Fondie's subtler, simpler sight? Bells, blossoms, birds, friendships, blessings, and glories seemed rioting in unparalleled profusion everywhere, and death and life—stretching out hands of fellowship and rapture in the eternal radiance of the sunlit world—made one; a chain rhapsodic, endless and unbroken. "Finally, brethren . . ."—the old words that always, at such moments, hovered dovelike about his mind, floated beatifically down upon him as he took his leave—"whatsoever things are true; whatsoever things are honest; whatsoever things are just; whatsoever things are lovely; whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue and if there be any praise . . . think on these things."

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